

VIDEOGAME CULTURE

MARCH 2005

# EDGE

NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | SET-TOP | ONLI

## SHOCK AND GORE

A CLOSE LOOK AT SCARE TACTICS

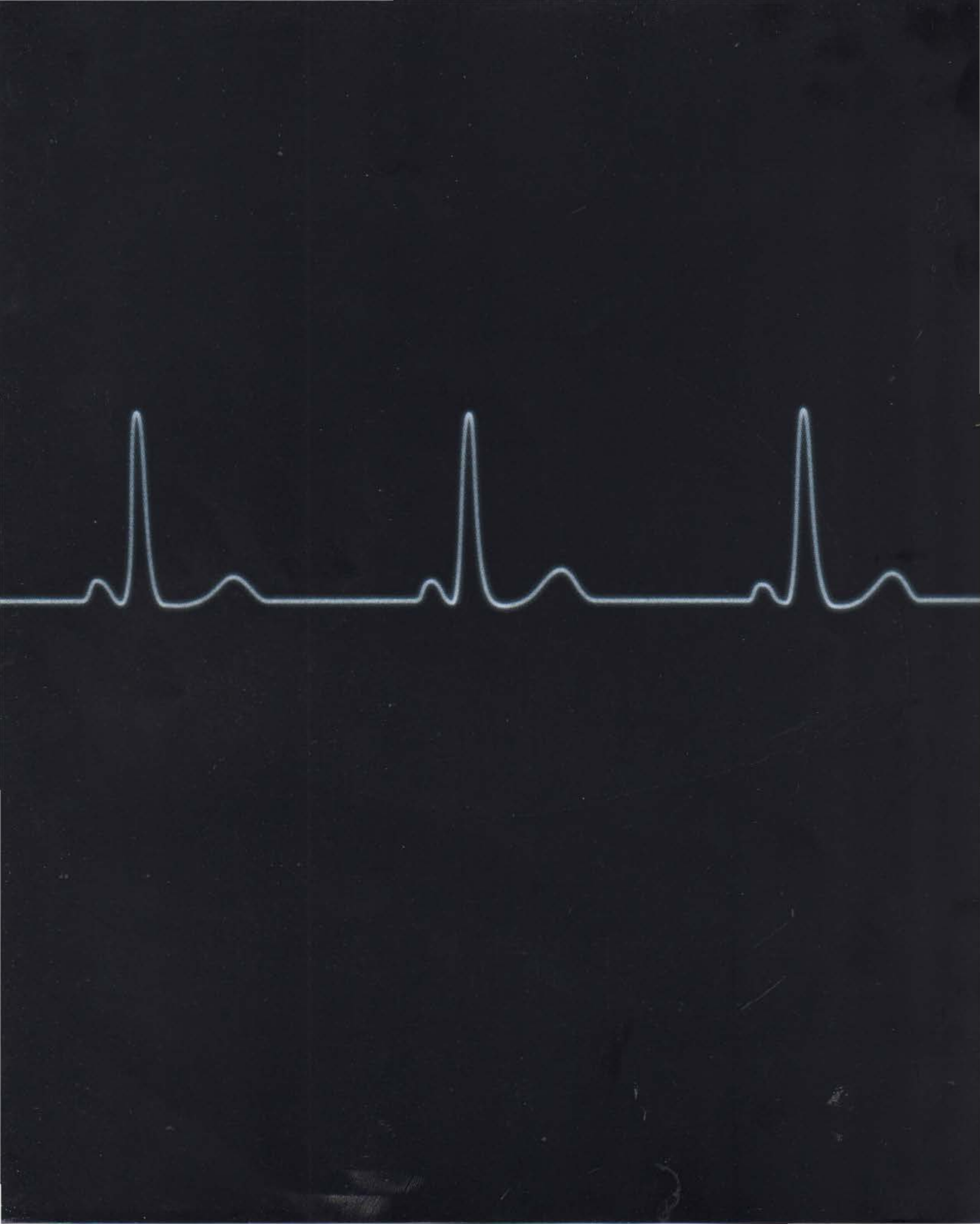
**GEORGE A ROMERO**
THE MOVIE LEGEND ON HIS FIRST VIDEOGAME PROJECT

**SPINE CHILLING**
DARKWORKS' COLD FEAR DRAGS SURVIVAL HORROR OUT TO SEA

**RESIDENT EVI**
THE VERDICT ON CAPCO SINISTER NEW DIRECT

**F.E.A.R. EFFEC**
IS MONOLITH'S PC FPS REA "THE MATRIX MEETS THE RIN

**PREVIEWED** DEVIL MAY CRY 3 **INFECTED** ANOTHER CODE **UNTOLD LEGENDS** RED NINJA **UNREAL CHAMPIONSHIP 2** BLE
**REVIEWED** GRAN TURISMO 4 **DARWINIA** MERCENARIES **PROJECT: SNOWBLIND** DEAD OR ALIVE: ULTIMATE **THE PUNIS**






An eight-year-old boy walks into his father's games room only to be told that the game being played isn't suitable for such young eyes. It's a game for grown-ups, it is explained. (It is the 18-rated *Resident Evil Zero*.) He must leave. The boy looks puzzled and asks, innocently: "But why would they make a game for grown-ups, daddy?"

This story belongs to a friend of ours (the father), but chances are you may have experienced similar situations. (Indeed, we're told of some readers hiding away their copies of the issue of **Edge** whose cover featured *Resident Evil 4*'s Leon Kennedy and his encounter with a chainsaw, for fear of it corrupting the minds of younger people in their households. Erm, sorry about that.) The fact is, there are more 18-rated videogames being made today than there have ever been. Which is no surprise when you consider that videogames have been around for over 30 years, and as a consequence many of those who play them are far from being under 18 years of age.

In this issue we take a close look at three big games for grown-ups – Monolith's *FEAR* (see p54), Darkworks' *Cold Fear* (p62) and Capcom's *Resident Evil 4* (p76) – and also take the opportunity to think about precisely what videogames are doing when they make us feel obliged to hurriedly usher small children out of the room (p68).

We've come a long way since the days when British publisher CRL earned its 8bit computer adventure game *Dracula* a 15 rating by inserting into its otherwise unremarkable code crude digitised pictures of severed heads and other gory bits and pieces. In terms of craftsmanship, in fact, the most accomplished survival horror titles are among the most sophisticated of all types of videogames. Coincidentally, they also cruelly pluck at our nerves, slap at our panic buttons and leave us swimming in adrenaline.

*That's* why they make games for grown-ups.

# EDGE


EDITORIAL
Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
**Edge** website www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
**Tony Mott** editor
**Darren Phillips** art editor
**Margaret Robertson** games editor
**Ian Evenden** production editor
**Andrew Hind** deputy art editor
**Ben Schroder** and **Duncan Harris** writers
**Christophe Kagotani** Tokyo bureau

CONTRIBUTORS
Koji Aizawa, Tameem Antoniades, Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, Brandon Boyer, João Diniz-Sanches, Tim Edwards, Tim Guest, Oliver Hurley, James Hutchinson, Jon Jordan, Simon Parkin, Gary Penn, Steven Poole, RedEye, Jim Rossignol, Mark Sorrell, Terry Stokes, Mark Walbank, Oliver Welsh, Steve Williams

PRODUCTION
**Kirsty Bell** senior production coordinator
**Rose Griffiths** production manager
**Colin Polis** commercial buyer

CIRCULATION
**Russell Hughes** trade marketing manager
**Duncan Shearer** group circulation manager

ADVERTISING
**Jayne Caple** advertising director
**Clare Williamson** head of sales
**Darren Gratton** advertising manager
**Richard Sturgess** recruitment advertising
**Ryan Ferguson** online ad manager
**Chris Thom** classified
**Advertising phone** 01225 442244

PUBLISHING
**Matthew Pierce** assistant publisher
**Ben Payne** promotions manager
**Simon Wear** international licensing director

SUBSCRIPTIONS & DISTRIBUTION
**Edge**,
Future Publishing Ltd,
FREEPOST RLSC-SXSE-SKKT
Unit 4, Tower House, Sovereign Park,
Market Harborough, Leicestershire.
LE16 PEF
Email: games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, 5th Floor,
Low Rise Building, Kings Reach Tower,
Stamford Street, London

SENIOR MANAGEMENT
**Robert Price** managing director
**Roger Parry** non-executive chairman
**Greg Ingham** chief executive
**John Bowman** group finance director

PRODUCTION OF EDGE
Hardware: Power Macintosh G4, G5
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Macromedia FreeHand, Adobe Illustrator and Microsoft Office
Typography: (Adobe®) Frutiger Light, Regular, Bold, Black, Italic. Max (TF/LF) Light, Regular, Semi-Bold, Bold, Black, Italic. Simian (Display/Text) Orangutan, Chimpanzee, Gorilla. QType Book, Medium, Bold, Italic. Prensa Book, Bold, Italic. Bad Excuse, Bad Excuse Solid.

Printed in the UK by Southernprint, Poole, Dorset





**Edge** is brought to you by Future Publishing Ltd, the makers of PC Gamer, GamesMaster, PlayStation2 Official Magazine-UK, PlayStation World, NGC, PSM2.

Future Publishing Ltd is part of Future plc.
Future produces carefully targeted special-interest magazines for people who share a passion. We aim to satisfy that passion by creating titles offering value for money, reliable information, smart buying advice and which are a pleasure to read. Today we publish more than 100 magazines in the UK, US, France and Italy. Over 100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 30 other countries.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).
www.futureplc.com


"Your ignorance is exceeded only by your actions, captain. How can we expect them to behave if we act barbarically ourselves?"





Media with passion
Printed in the UK







ABC **27,464**
January-June 2004
(Audit Bureau of Circulation)





# CONTENTS

MARCH 2005

## This month





















## Every month




# CONTENTS
CONTINUED

## Hype



## Review





## START






START

Satoru Iwata's appearance at the Paris event was a welcome surprise, and more valuable PR for Nintendo in Europe



HANDHELDS

# DS sets sights on Europe

Nintendo handheld hits magic £100 mark for early March debut

If there's one thing you're supposed to take away from a launch announcement it's the date and price of the new console. For most attendees of Nintendo's moderately glitzy Paris event it was information they brought with them. The date, March 11, and the price, a recommended €150 and £100, had been widely leaked in the days leading up to the official proclamation, which meant the announcement was met with polite applause rather than gasps of astonishment. Not that there weren't surprises – an amiable speech from Will Wright outlining his commitment to Nintendo's continuing tradition of innovation was an unexpected pleasure, as was the sight of some European journalists having the temerity to beat Satoru Iwata, Nintendo's president, at eightplayer *Mario Kart DS*.

The main news of the day, while not surprising, was certainly heartening. A March 11 release means that Europe will only have to wait 14 weeks for the DS from its debut in the US – a blink of an eye by Nintendo's traditionally leaden standards. The £100 price point, backed up with software split over a recommended €40/£30 for major releases and €30/£20 for more modest games (such as Nintendo's own *Polarium*, the European name for *One Line Puzzle*), gives the DS a good chance of maintaining some clear blue water between itself and the looming possibilities of the PSP. The game line-up is patchy, as all launch line-ups tend to be, but the presence of the *Metroid Prime: Hunters* demo, alongside the likes of *Wario Ware: Touched*, *Zoo Keeper*, *Super Mario 64 DS* and *Project Rub* should keep early adopters going.

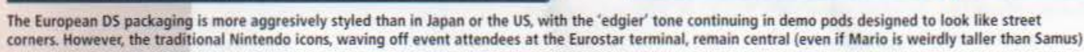
More striking, perhaps, was that Nintendo took advantage of the event to fire a number of shots across Sony's bows, with Jim Merrick, NoE's head of marketing, proudly trumpeting Nintendo's figure of 2.8 million DSes sold in the US and Japan by the end of 2004 (compared to just under 500,000 PSPs), and rather pointedly proclaiming that the DS's superior battery life will enable the company to "retain industry leadership in providing long-lasting, non-stop gameplay." The figures are persuasive, but the question is how long Nintendo's lead will last once Sony ramps up production of its handheld. However, with no announcement from Sony on the European launch for the PSP, Europe is Nintendo's chance to extend that lead. It has 650,000 units available for launch, and the DS will be supported by a €35 million (£24 million) marketing campaign, a dramatic step up from the €10 million (£7 million) spent on the SP's launch. However, how well that money will be spent remains to be seen. Although the European TV adverts hadn't been shot at the time of the event, Nintendo was able to unveil The Finger, a vast, rather unpleasant, papier-mache hand which is to tour Europe and convey the DS's touchability to the uninitiated. There followed an excruciating five minutes of 'comedy', where marketing manager Tim Freystedt held a conversation with a videotape of a talking finger. Hopefully, the placeholder presentation wasn't indicative of the direction of the real adverts.

**A March 11 release means that Europe will only have to wait 14 weeks for the DS from its debut in the US – a blink of an eye by Nintendo's traditionally leaden standards**

Also striking was the arrival of Satoru Iwata. After a hilarious jape where he pretended to be talking via videophone from Japan, he took the stage to embark on a passionate explanation of why he feels that new consoles which simply offer "beefed-up graphics and sound" cannot do enough to increase the videogaming population, and unless that population is increased, "there is no bright future for this industry." However, even before he tackled this issue so central to the DS's conception, he dived straight in to addressing the concerns of European Nintendo fans, declaring himself "very, very sorry" for the delays on product releases – which he blamed on localisation issues and varience in regional regulations – and holding up *The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap* and *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* as examples of how seriously Nintendo is taking the issue.

There's no doubt that Nintendo is in buoyant mood over its DS – there's a confidence born from the success of the Japanese and US launches, and a hint of surprised elation that Sony has left them such a clear pitch. The challenge now is to install a substantial enough userbase before the PSP bandwagon starts to roll.



The European DS packaging is more aggresively styled than in Japan or the US, with the 'edgier' tone continuing in demo pods designed to look like street corners. However, the traditional Nintendo icons, waving off event attendees at the Eurostar terminal, remain central (even if Mario is weirdly taller than Samus)

*Robots* (below) will be the only Euro launch game not currently available in the US or Japan. Meanwhile, actual game packaging will be plastic cases, much like those seen in other territories












## DS UK launch line-up

The games that will be on the shelves come March 11

- Super Mario 64 DS
- Wario Ware Touched!
- Pokémon Dash
- Polarium (aka One Line Puzzle)
- Project Rub
- The Urbz
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour
- Mr Driller: Drill Spirits
- Spider-Man 2
- Rayman DS
- Asphalt Urban GT
- Sprung
- Zoo Keeper
- Robots
- Ping Pals

Continued




INTERVIEW

# "We're not showing the same movies"

Nintendo of Europe's marketing director Jim Merrick gives us his take on the DS-PSP conflict, confirming that it's not about cushy seats and cup holders...

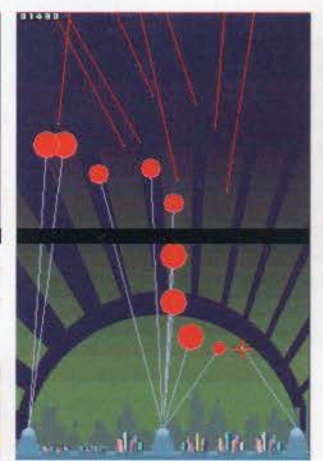
**Jim Merrick** worked alongside Nintendo president Satoru Iwata during lowlier days building N64 libraries at NoA. When Iwata became president, he appointed Merrick, who had strong connections in both Europe and Japan, as European head of marketing as part of his programme to 'globalise' the company. With the DS launching in Europe just 14 weeks after the US, how much has really changed? We found out at the DS event in Paris.

**You chose to open the launch event by discussing the PSP and how its sales compare with those of the DS. What made you want to begin the event by talking about your competitors?**
It's the inevitable question. Here in Europe, the PSP is as real a competitor as DS is right now. Neither has launched, but both have generated a lot of coverage from other markets. It's the inevitable question so I thought let's just embrace that right away.

**The numbers you quoted were very positive. Did you expect to be in such a strong position?**
The PSP for us, more than anything, was quite an unknown. The strategy this time around from Sony is quite different. Nobody seemed to know a lot about it in Japan prior to launch or in the US and Europe now – they don't know where they're going with it. We believe very strongly in the DS and the innovation that it brings, its potential to expand the market at the same time as satisfying core gamers. And we think that actually that's a limitation of the PSP, that it has met expectations, but that's it.

**Iwata has made some very strong statements about Sony's failure to innovate, and its reliance on 'old formulas' that won't help grow the gaming market. Do you think that's a fair comment in light of the PSP's music and movie playback capabilities, which will attract a whole new segment of gamers?**





The DS's portfolio for 2005 includes innovations like *Nintendogs*, a touching take on the Tamagotchi idea, and updates like *Retro Atari Classics*, which includes *Missile Command*

I think you have to be cautious about the multimedia possibilities. As an MP3 player, for example, the PSP is really the largest MP3 player in the world, and it's still based on the Memory Stick format and that isn't today's format for MP3 players which are really hard disk based. It's a crime of opportunity – people will use it as an MP3 player because they can, but it won't be your primary MP3 player. As a movie player – well, actually that's a bit of a puzzle too. They aren't really very many movies available for it now – I'm sure they'll solve that but they're having some licensing issues with it being a propriety format. But – well, are you a movie buff? Do you own any DVDs? What will you do with them on your PSP? You will have to re-buy those movies if you want to play them on your PSP – you won't be renting them because no rental shop is going to carry UMDs. I think these things are the icing around the core functionality which is gameplay, and I'm not sure that icing is enough. It's not an innovation.

> **"We believe very strongly in the DS, the innovation that it brings and its potential to expand the market at the same time as satisfying core gamers"**

**Nintendo seems to be very vocal about the PSP, whereas Sony usually refuses to comment on the DS. Is that a policy decision?**
No – actually, there may be a difference of opinion about that. Mr Iwata doesn't say as much about it as I do. [Laughs] But with Sony, if you look at their CES presentation, they said: "Oh, we're not competing with Nintendo, we're competing with the iPod." But what did they hand out? A spec sheet comparing PSP and DS and GBA. So I think what they're saying and where they know they've got to fight aren't quite that same thing.

**Which would you rather? Surely if they're targeting the iPod, then it removes the pressure of a direct head-to-head. Would you really prefer them to be hammering home the spec difference between the two machines?**
If you're playing a game of specsmanship, then they will win that battle, that's true. But you'll notice that we're not. Have we talked about our processor speed or our number of polygons? No.

**But you can't talk about those things because you know you can't compete in those terms.**
Well, that's a fundamental difference of opinion. We just don't think they're relevant. In the end, the consumer buys the gameplay experience, it doesn't really matter what processor you have. I always use the movie analogy – you choose to go to a theatre based on which movie is playing, not which one has cushy seats and cup holders.

**That's not really a fair analogy, though – those things are incidental, whereas we're talking about core issues of audio and graphical capabilities.**
Well, given the choice between two cinemas showing the same movie, then sure I'm going to choose the Imax, 70 mm, Dolby-equipped one – yeah, you're right. And the PSP is a beautiful piece of hardware, the design is quite nice, the screen is gorgeous. They've had some issues with reliability in Japan, but they will sort that out, I'm sure of it, and it's going to be a beautiful piece of hardware. But then we're not showing the same movies.

**You've announced two price tiers for games – £30 and £20. When we spoke to Reggie Fils-Amie [NoA's VP of sales and marketing] he said he didn't feel the US market was sophisticated enough to support two price points. Are you saying European gamers are more sophisticated than Americans?**
Absolutely. As an American, I can state that definitively. [Laughs] I think it's about consumer value – it's worked in Japan – about the hours of gameplay and strength of gameplay. We'll be pricing *Polarium* (*One Line Puzzle*) at the lower price point, but we expect all the thirdparty games to go out at the higher price point.

**Iwata took a very striking tone in his speech, saying he was "very, very sorry" for the situation in Europe. Did the impetus for that statement come from NoE's sense of how frustrated Nintendo owners here are?**
[Laughs] As much as I would like to be able to put words into Mr Iwata's mouth, and direct what he's going to say, I have so far been unsuccessful. He wrote his own speech. Certainly, his apology up front is 100 per cent from the heart from Mr Iwata.

**There's been a clear shift in Nintendo's**

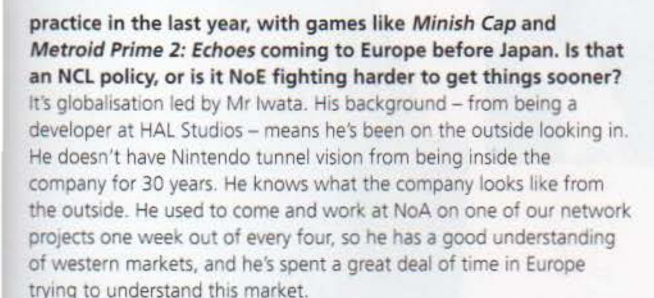








Eightplayer *Mario Kart DS* – alongside a live performance by Girls Aloud – was the highlight of the show, although it did seem a little on the slow side. *Yoshi's Touch And Go*, meanwhile, is now known as *Catch! Touch! Yoshi!*



**practice in the last year, with games like *Minish Cap* and *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* coming to Europe before Japan. Is that an NCL policy, or is it NoE fighting harder to get things sooner?**
It's globalisation led by Mr Iwata. His background – from being a developer at HAL Studios – means he's been on the outside looking in. He doesn't have Nintendo tunnel vision from being inside the company for 30 years. He knows what the company looks like from the outside. He used to come and work at NoA on one of our network projects one week out of every four, so he has a good understanding of western markets, and he's spent a great deal of time in Europe trying to understand this market.

**The DS – like the PSP – has gone to market before you were ready to confirm its wi-fi functionality. Why is that?**
Two reasons: the local wireless mode we think delivers value for consumers immediately. Anyone can understand it, you just turn it on and it just works and that's part of the message we're trying to get across with DS. To bring wi-fi is a bit of a mismatch. Console games have become popular because they're so simple – you plug in a game and it just works. No drivers, no patches, no configuration, no passwords. The internet is the opposite case – it's fraught with acronyms – and we've got to find a way to marry those two things in a way which keeps that simple consumer experience and that's going to take some time. And it's going to take some partnerships with service providers and hotspots and things.

**How much of the burden of making wi-fi workable falls on the shoulders of external companies you don't control?**
There's a significant part which is local in each market where the service providers are. There's a lot – it's going to depend on the games and what they need to do. If it's a simple matchmake, then that isn't too bad. You could use GameSpy, which is a very nice product and works quite well, and perhaps some DS games will use GameSpy for their matchmakers.

**Have you been following the 'tunnellers' who are trying to hack the DS's wi-fi capabilities?**
Oh, yeah! I love all that stuff. They got their DSes and right away they were looking at the SSID numbers and going: "Oh, look, it is it really is wi-fi even when it's in local mode." I love it.

**Nintendo's big argument for the DS is that it's going to attract a new demographic to gaming. From the data you have from sales in the US and Japan, can you tell if you've been successful?**
Certainly, with the female side of the demographic we're definitely seeing a big uplift both in Japan and the US. In terms of demographics and psychographics – gamer profiles – it's too early because we get this bump from early adopters which skews the whole thing, but the female demographic is already much stronger. I had a look at the early numbers from Japan last week, and already that's really clear. Although, at this stage, it's about all that is clear!

HARDWARE

# US PSP to arrive in March

## Sony announces the date everyone expected but not the price some feared was due, amid talk of control issues

March 24, $250 (£133). With those two pieces of information, a continent of gamers stopped holding its breath. The date is what Sony always indicated it intended to hit, beating the end of its financial year on March 31, and the price – a clear $100 (£53) above the DS – is still less than the $300 many predicted when the machine's specs and looks were first revealed. The price includes all the elements of the Japanese Value Pack (32Mb Memory Stick Duo, headphones, carry case, etc) and, crucially, the first million purchasers will also receive a free UMD video release of Spider-Man 2. The 24-strong game line-up, which most retailers are pricing at $50 (£27) – includes *Wipeout Pure*, *Metal Gear Acid*, *Rengoku: Tower of Purgatory*, *Ridge Racer* and *Lumines*, as well as nine sports titles. Even more interesting for European consumers is that Sony has announced it still intends to ship three million PSPs worldwide by the end of March. With a million units earmarked for the US, and 800,000 already sold in Japan, that leaves 1.2 million units to be shared between the Japanese market and a potential European launch in the spring.

At home, the PSP has been facing some heated criticism. Ken Kutaragi, speaking in an interview with Nikkei Business magazine, has responded robustly to claims that the PSP is badly designed. Just under 5,000 units have been returned to Sony, mostly due to problems with unresponsive Square buttons. The problem stems from the placement of the detection switch, which is located beside the button rather than directly underneath it, due to the button's proximity to the PSP's screen. Kutaragi makes it clear that to change the placement of the switch would have meant either making the screen smaller or the PSP body larger, something he wasn't willing to do. It highlights just how high on the agenda the machine's physical appearance has been, and emphasises the difficulties involved in manufacturing such a sophisticated unit (moving parts and all), something which has also been behind the inability of Sony's production line to meet consumer demand.




An issue with the PSP unit's Square button has resulted in a few thousand units being returned to Sony




Cycraft-aided *Initial D* could be argued to be more exhilarating and just as life-threatening as actual Togue racing




The local *Special Tours* sit-in cabinets have lost their blinding Ferrari-red lacquer, and the larger screen size comes at the cost (-cutting) of rear projection, but it's still effortlessly appealing

# Business as usual for arcades at ATEI '05

## UK trade show sees activity from coin-op gaming's biggest names, but no change in its fortunes

In the economics of gaming, as with all maturing capitalist markets, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. ATEI continues to be the grubby, worn-down flipside to the ECTS coin. The boothgirls at the former are clearly hired from a slightly cheaper agency, the make-up is marginally thicker, and the appreciative attendees sport significantly wider waistlines.

The yearly rhythm and tone of our reporting on the UK's only major arcade show is well established now: arcades are dead; long live the arcades – in all their emaciated contemporary anti-glory. Of the hundreds of exhibitors from the leisure industry exhibiting only four were major coin-op developers: business as usual for ATEI, then.

Everyone acknowledges the strangulation of the local videogame arcade at the hands of home console owners, and the chance of any radical antidote surfacing at Earl's Court on a freezing January morning was unlikely. So instead we took the show at face value, as apparently did a surprisingly large number of gamers, all turning up to sift through the gambling machines and novelty pool tables in search of something worthy of credit.

Drawing a direct comparison with last year's show, Sega would appear to be in rude health. Clearly the lead player in the quartet of publishers present, its booth sat proudly at the centre of the exhibition hall with easily the most expansive carpet dominance. This prominence provided an all-too-overt reminder that, without its final-bastion input and output, arcade videogaming would long since have trickled into British oblivion.

**The sight of rotund businessmen gunning down cuddly animals with Mafioso glee in Extreme Hunting was nothing if not memorable**

Pride of place went to the four linked *OutRun 2 Special Tours* sit-in cabinets. This iteration, dubbed *OutRun 2 SP*, is clearly placed as the definitive *OutRun 2* package with 15 new courses, ten new cars, additional game modes, internet ranking and, of particular interest to historical fanatics, the original 1986 *OutRun* soundtrack. The sit-in car cabinets gleamed with beaming yellow decals but, emphasising how arcades now lag behind in new technology rather than spearheading it, *SP* was running on rear-projection monitors (as did all Sega's games as a cost-cutting measure).

Cashing in on terror came the *Confidential Mission*-styled *Ghost Squad* on Sega's Chihiro, boasting the Republican rallying tag line 'Zero tolerance on terrorism'. To augment the plot-by-numbers 'fight terrorists to rescue the president' banality, USPs came from a single-shot/three-shot-burst/full-auto option on the submachine lightgun and a saveable IC card in the *Initial D* style.

Speaking of Sega Rosso's anime-themed racer, *Initial D 3* code was loaded into Sega's magnificent Cycraft moving cabinets. The stuff of '80s schoolboy prophecy, the sit-in cabs first debuted last year with link-up *F-Zero* on offer (and were cited as our game of show). While, for the more traditional arcade drifting of *Initial D*, the outlandish cabinet seemed like overkill, there's no denying these are still the most exciting, if largely unobtainable, experience arcades have to offer.

*Virtua Striker 4* was less of a success story. Despite its new *ISS* styling and player card technology (allowing team customisation and home stadium improvements) the controls were sluggish and flow of play rudimentary. At least the hardware was running on some slinky Naomi universal machines providing a renewed purpose for what are arguably Sega's finest cabinets since




With ECTS's decline and last year's PlayStation Experience snubbing Earls Court for Alton Towers, the venue's gaming pull has seen better times. Turnout, however, was cheering





The Atomiswave contingent ranged from *KOF: NeoWave* (left) to the more dubious end of the scale with *Extreme Hunting* (right) – ATEI proving too early to showcase some of the platform's more impressive titles, such as *SNK Battle Coliseum*




Football, racing and lightgun shooting were unsurprisingly the key genres selected by UK arcade industry leader Sega to make the trip across the Pacific, although, bizarrely, its card-based beetle fighter was also on show (see 'Beetlemania', right)




## Beetlemania

### Giant beetle battles a hit with kids

**Sega's low ball, and perhaps the most unlikely IP of the event, came from its diminutive *Mushiking* cabinets. The unlikely hybrid marriage of scissor paper stone with a giant stag beetle fighting sim was a massive success in Japan last year, thanks largely to the collectable card element. The display cabinets stuffed with *Mushiking* merchandise almost transported onlookers to Harajuku's famous Kiddy Land toy store – where much of *Mushiking*'s merchandise was sold last year. Indeed, it's clear which market the *Mushiking* bandwagon is aiming for – the cabinets stand just 1.3 metres high and carry a recommendation for 5-12 year olds.**

the Astro City. In testament to their ongoing appeal Sega had two of the new Naomi Deluxe sit-down cabinets on display, their 38" CRT monitors allegedly screen-burn proof.

Sega's catalogue was clearly bolstered by the incorporation of Sammy's Atomiswave hardware and branding into its own. This effectively doubled the number of games on offer, while – it wouldn't be unfair to say – drastically lowering the average quality. Everything on offer, bar *King Of Fighters: NeoWave*, was substandard and derivative, but the sight of rotund businessmen gunning down cuddly animals with Mafioso glee in *Extreme Hunting* was nothing if not memorable.

Konami's booth was far more densely populated than last year, thanks in main to the new *European Dancing Stage Fusion* cabinet greeting attendees as they entered the hall. Needless to say, Konami's female 'expert' demonstrators, once ushered off the machine, looked on with no small amount of disquiet as showboating London arcade veterans stepped their way through the toughest tracks on offer. Still, Konami's successor to the astonishingly popular *Dancing Stage Euromix 2* cabinet, while perhaps a little tardy, nonetheless does everything it should to continue being the highest videogame earner in British arcades.

Seemingly at rest from last year's *Space Invaders* anniversary celebrations, Taito had little to offer save its Transformers-esque *Zoids: Zoids Infinity* machine enticing purchasers with the triplet soundbites 'Feel the ride', 'Make dreams by a card' and 'Fascinate the players!' Similarly, Namco had very little in the way of output on display, nestling all its eggs in the *Tekken 5* basket, which attracted crowds three-deep throughout the show.

So where does that leave us? Underneath the spattering of new arcade titles, ATEI as a show still feels sleazy. In contrast to Japanese arcades (and arcade shows) videogames here are firmly associated with slot machines and gambling. Although both fundamentally exist to earn small change, the experiences they offer, and the communities they gather, are poles apart. With public opinion currently set dead against Las Vegas-style gambling complexes, it seems a shame to force arcade games to fight the tide of public opinion as well as that of consolisation. Gambling apologists were rife, so ATEI had videogames aiding a battle that isn't theirs. Until British-based visionaries can begin to crowbar public gambling and public gaming apart – and reinvent and remarket what local videogaming arcade means – that yearly rhythm and tone of our reports seems set to play on.

Newswire




## Nintendo forms DS THQ alliance

**A legal filing has revealed that American publisher THQ has acquired 'the right to use certain of Nintendo's intellectual property to develop, publish and distribute videogames for the Nintendo DS... until January 25, 2008'. The deal follows other significant THQ licensing deals of a similar nature in the handheld space, notably with Sega (the likes of *Crazy Taxi* and *Sonic Advance 3* on GBA were produced under the THQ banner), and obviously allows Nintendo to bolster its DS roster with proven concepts but minus the leg work. It's not yet known which IPs will be used by THQ, but the first fruits of the deal are expected this year.**



INTERVIEW

# Monster hunter

## Housewives, competition, the DS and the PSP with the man behind Devil May Cry 3, Tsuyoshi Tanaka

**Producer Tsuyoshi Tanaka is infamous for taking the reins of *Devil May Cry* from Capcom's cool guru Shinji Mikami, but the one-time videogame journo has also overseen Production Studio 1's online experiments in both *Resident Evil: Outbreak* games and the cult success of *Monster Hunter*. We met up with him during his *DMC3* tour.**

***DMC2* was criticised among the gaming community for its simplification, though this didn't appear to affect its sales. How do you feel about its reception?**

[Exasperated] Every single journalist asks about 'what went wrong' with that game. But *DMC1* was made by a hardcore developer and was for hardcore gamers! With *DMC2* we intentionally went out to get light users. And so it sold well, and we recieved many compliments from housewives, school kids, people like that.

**"The reason I like PSP so much is because in my mind games should be very casual. You can just pick one up and enjoy it, then put it away. The graphics are good, the sound is really good"**

**Is *DMC3* aimed at committed or light users?**

Both. With *DMC3* we wanted to go out and make the best action game in the market for PS2. So I decided to introduce these four different play styles. Trickster, with the dodging, is basically from *DMC2* and could be considered the easy setting. Royal Guard is for hardcore gamers. The majority of players will choose a favourite style and stick with it, I think.

**When you talk about the action game market for the PS2, what do you consider the competition to be?**

We don't consider there's much that rivals *DMC3*. *Metal Gear Solid* is not really an action game... so I can't think of any competition in this genre.

**Production Studio 1 has a fairly enviable track record, but a low profile. Do you think it gets the praise it deserves?**

No, I don't really think so. As you say, my studio has *Devil May Cry* and *Monster Hunter*. Out of three prestigious awards we've won two in Japan this year. But also I'm very interested in online games and I think our studio has the knowhow.

**How do you feel Capcom's outlook has changed since the recent restructuring?**

I don't think the company has changed that much though the industry is certainly changing. With new platforms like Xenon and PS3, even more money is required so it's going to be more like movie production. As a creator I want to make new things all the time, but I also realise that for profits we must look to sequels.

**Has Capcom begun next-generation work?**

Yeah, we are already thinking about it. I'm very interested in network communication so I'm







Tanaka's finest hours to date: the ponderous, calculated multiplayer of *Monster Hunter* (left) and the gratifyingly explosive singleplayer *DMC3*. Our attempts to lead him on a possible crossover of Studio 1's skills – *Devil Hunter*, perhaps? – were unfortunately unsuccessful

**Newswire**

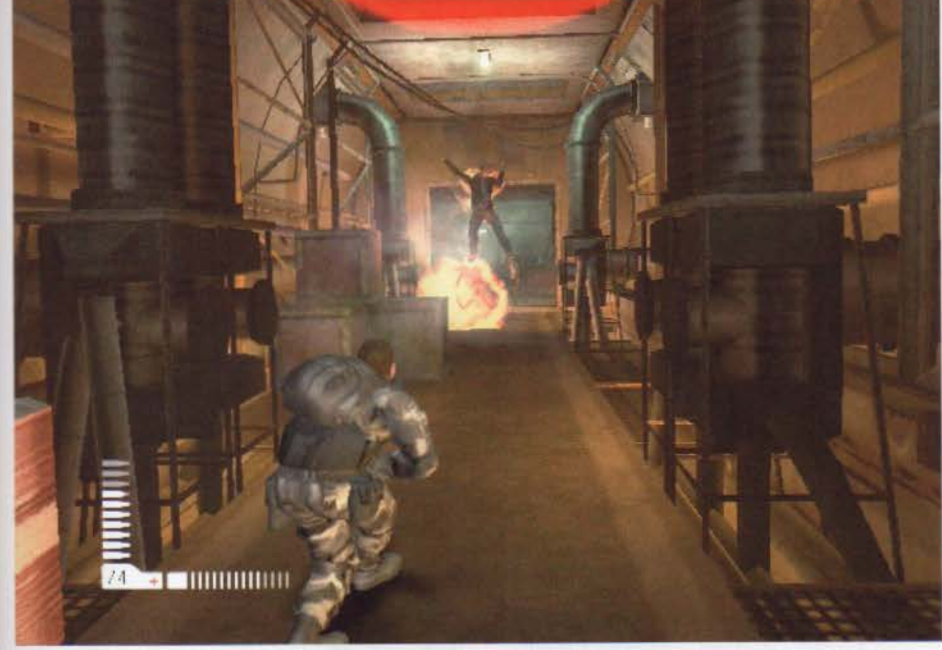
gameZone live

1-4 SEPT 2005 ExCeL, LONDON

### Game Stars Live evolves

**Game Stars Live, the only multiformat videogame show in the UK open to the public, is changing its name to GameZone Live. The decision to rebrand the event was taken to give the event an edgier, adult air – less reminscent of the likes of Pop Stars – and to reflect the 'zoning' which will take place inside the event, with floorspace divided up into the likes of Retro, Action and Extreme PC sections. The separation from ITV's Game Stars brand also enables more extended TV coverage from other companies. The business element, EGN, will run beside the event for the first two days of the show, which now kicks off with the Develop Awards. Last year's developer-focused stream EDF will not be returning, but there's still no confirmation on the location planned for GDCE.**










As we went to press, Capcom was holding its 2005 Las Vegas software conference, with new announcements including the first title from ex-Core-staffed Circle Studios, *Without Warning* (top), and *BeatDown: Fists Of Vengeance* (above left), a fighting game from *Drakengard* developer Cavia. A fully playable version of the stylish and wholly outlandish *Killer 7* (above right) was also on show

getting ready for PSP. The reason why I like PSP so much is because in my mind games should be very casual. You can just pick one up [lifts pencil case] and enjoy it, then put it away. The graphics are good, the sound is really good. I'm already thinking about how to incorporating some cool music into my games. It's a great machine.

**Where do you see gaming in five years?**

First of all I should say this is my opinion, not Capcom's. So, personally, I'm not sure how Nintendo is going to be in four or five years' time. It's hard to tell because I still think Mr Miyamoto's games are interesting and will continue to be so. Having said that, Xbox 2 is going to be really popular. I think Xbox 2 will be a hit. American games are growing and becoming more popular, and that trend is going to continue on Xbox 2.

**It's been interesting to see that the original Xbox failed to catch on in Japan, though.**

First of all, the Japanese are simply not into games at the moment. *Halo 2* sold 5-6 million around the world, but it didn't reach 100,000 copies in Japan. There was a feeling that western games were not suitable for Japanese players, but actually *Halo 2* is perfectly suitable for Japanese tastes. However, it came out at the wrong time and did not sell. It's the same with the Xbox itself: everyone already has a PS2 and a GameCube. PS2 won. Japanese gamers didn't have any need to buy another console, so Xbox was just too late.

And it's not just Microsoft's games – I like *GTA*, but it only sold about 300,000 in Japan even with the PS2 numbers being what they are. It's a conservative time for the market.

**What's your take on Nintendo's DS?**

I think it's interesting. I have one idea I'd like to take to DS. However, the majority of opinion is that PSP is going to be bigger. It's the same situation as the PS2: people in Japan bought the PS2 even if they didn't like games. They could use it as a DVD player. With PSP you can download images from your camera, your computer, and so on – it has that 'not just a games machine' appeal.

**Will that affect Nintendo's next console?**

It's hard to say because when you look at the machines Microsoft and Sony are about to release it's not just about gaming, is it? They are multimedia devices. From that point of view, I have an expectation that Nintendo will release a pure games machine. That's why it came up with touchscreen technology. So there's no comparison there. It depends on the user, whether they want a pure gaming machine or something like the PS2. It was a trend that consumers went for a PS2. Maybe there'll be another trend for pure gaming. Nintendo could still surprise us all.




## JUMP TO FRIGHT-SPEED

Those unhappy with owning a machine known online as 'X-Brick' and 'Beefy Briefcase' may delight in the knowledge that, thanks to eBay, the stupefying Xfalcon mk II can now be theirs instead. Perhaps this is misleading; as you read this there's every chance that the custom Xbox – modestly priced at £800 – will already be in the hands of one lucky customer. It's clear, after all, that the project has fulfilled all of its advertised prerequisites: it looks 'as much like a Millennium Falcon as possible' and, as is paramount, features 'a hyperdrive'. This proves to be a six-strong array of luminous fans incorporated, one assumes, as a safeguard against the light-speed malfunctions that so humiliated Han Solo and Lando Calrissian during the Star Wars trilogy. Nevertheless, cries of "It's not my fault!" may yet be heard when this contraption lands on the household table.

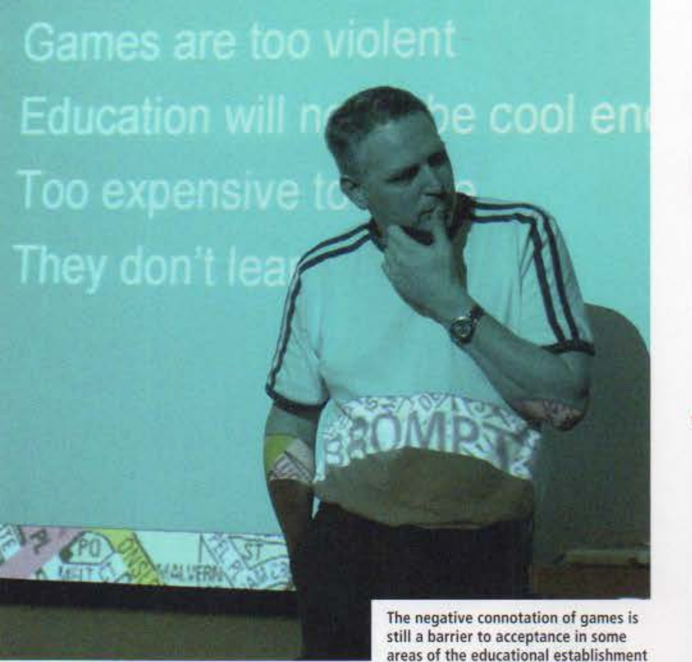


## WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

It's a good few years, now, since he proclaimed that he'd conquered worlds, and sparked a thousand crummy teabreak impersonations. In the years since, videogaming advertising has expanded and evolved: the best – *Katamari Damacy* springs to mind – took gaming to a new audience. The worst – *Metroid Prime*'s arthritic man-in-a-Samus suit, for one – confirmed every non-gamer's sneering suspicions. This huge archive (which has grown considerably in recent months) is now an essential, and often hilarious, link to how gaming sees itself.

Site:
**Gaming adverts**
URL:
**www.majkel.mds.pl/html/reklama/indexUKG.htm**





The negative connotation of games is still a barrier to acceptance in some areas of the educational establishment




## DIAGNOSIS POKÉMON

**Inspiring a new rash of unintentionally novel headlines, scientists at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York have isolated and identified a gene responsible for the reaction leading to a broad variety of cancerous cell mutations, known as the POK Erythroid Myeloid Ontogenic factor or – wait for it – Pokemon for short. Dr Pier Paolo Pandolfi, senior author of the study, confessed that the coincidental abbreviation was "pure serendipity," and stressed that the discovery was "very serious," presumably hyper-aware that the discovery had now taken on a life of its own. The gene now shares the gamer-biology spotlight with Sonic Hedgehog, a protein found to speed neural stem cell reproduction by as much as three times (insert your own blast processing joke here), so-called as mutations in the gene caused the growth of spiny ridges in fruit fly embryos.**

www.mskcc.org

EVENT

# Playing to learn

## Games are fun, but the difficulties of using them to make good learning enjoyable was a key concern at the Digiplay4 conference

The idea that videogames can be used to aid learning is no longer a controversial one. Nevertheless, the theme running through the recent Digiplay4 conference in London was the problematic nature of how to integrate games within the curriculum. Entitled Teaching With, Learning From Computer Games, and held at the Centre For The Study of Children, Youth and Media, part of the Institute Of Education, University Of London, it bought together researchers, teachers and developers to explore the potential use of games.

According to **David Buckingham**, a professor at the IOE, one of the big issues facing the sector is the lack of a theoretical framework. "The drive at the moment is for teaching through games," he said. "This is an approach which relies on the view that learning is boring and games are fun." Yet every anecdotal example of the worth of a *Sim City* or a *Civilisation* in the classroom can be countered by wider concerns ranging from scheduling games within an already busy timetable to the confidence of teachers as well as the verisimilitude of the actual games themselves. The result has been a move to developing highly focused testbeds. One agency active in this area is NESTA Futurelab. Funded by the Department For Education And Skills, its mission is to explore new approaches to learning with technologies.

> **"The drive at the moment is for teaching through games, which relies on the view that learning is boring and games are fun"**

One of its recent projects was *Virtual Savannah*. Run in conjunction with the BBC's Natural History department and technology partners such as HP, it used wireless GPS location-tracking to enable a group of ten to 12-year-olds to take the role of a pride of lions on their school playing field. Demonstrating some of the subtleties required by educational software, as well activities such as hunting prey, the virtual lions had to ensure they didn't die of dehydration by straying too far from water. Another threat came from the possibility of their cubs being trampled by elephants. After each of the hour-long missions, there was a debriefing session where feedback was given and further research on the behaviour of lions undertaken.


Bolton Institute's Paul Hollins (left) discusses educational projects with ELSPA's Mike Rawlinson during the Digiplay4 conference


Barry Atkins from the University Of Manchester explored childrens' use of games with NESTA Futurelab's Mary Ulicsak

Considered a success, *Virtual Savannah* highlights some of the difficulties of deploying educational software however. A resource-heavy project, both in terms of the technology and support staff required, it took 18 months to develop but was only experienced by 36 children in one school. The fact that the school concerned has since sold its playing field to a housing developer also demonstrates some of the other pressures faced by the educational sector.

More traditional in their location and scope are collaborative rescue game *Astroversity* and the physically modelled *Racing Academy*. Both sponsored by NESTA Futurelabs, these are PC-based games with a focus on encouraging communication between players. Developed by the International Centre for Digital Content, part of the John Moore's University Liverpool, *Astroversity* has players trying to rescue astronauts from a toxic chemical spill, while *Racing Academy* offers demonstrations of car dynamics, based on a commercial engine from developer Lateral Visions.

Clearly learning via games is being taken seriously within certain circles. Now it needs broadened support from further afield.






# New day dawns for director of the dead

Survival horror is finally getting its man, as George A Romero announces his gaming arrival

Stepping into a space reserved for him since survival horror's year dot, celebrated film director George A Romero has finally thrown his hat into the gaming domain; specifically, in the direction of Hip Interactive and development partner Kuju Entertainment. Having unleashed whole genres of 'homage' upon both movies and games, only now will his legion of groaning kiss-chasers feel the guiding hand of the master. Cornered on the Toronto set of his revival picture (pun not intended) Land Of The Dead, the cult luminary had much to say about his as-yet-untitled videogame debut.

**Your work has always fascinated videogame makers, but there's never been an official George A Romero title. So why now, and why Kuju/Hip?**

It came around [laughs]. I don't know how to respond to that; I've always been interested. I have a 13-year-old at home who's like a fanatic. I worked for a while on the movie version of *Resident Evil* but it never panned out. They didn't like the work that I did – the Capcom people did, the producers didn't [laughs]. I really just got fascinated by that game. I didn't play it – my assistant played it and recorded it so I could watch it while I worked on my script. I thought: 'Gee, it'd be nice to do a game'. There's been a big Electronic Entertainment College for the last of couple years in Pittsburgh. I went over there and hung out a little bit with the people who were designing games – or wanted to design games – and we talked about the possibility of a zombie game. But we never really got it off the ground – they don't have distribution or publication there.

I've been interested, and it was just coincidental that I got the call asking if I'd wanted to collaborate on some games. I said: "OK, this might be a good way to get involved in the business and just learn about it."

**"One of the themes in my films is lack of communication. This is part of the direction we're heading in with this game – making people play together"**

**What is your role on the project and how much control do you have?**

Of course, contractually, I have certain approvals over the games and storyline. I recently did a comic book series for DC and I was heavily involved; I'd love to be as involved in these games. I'm going to get more and more involved in the next few weeks in both storyline and gameplay.

**If the marketing people on the game had to pull out one of its aspects for the back of the box, would it be its ability to scare, its storyline, action or something else?**

We don't want to reveal what the game will be about this early. Marketing people don't scare me anyway – I scare the shit out of them! [Laughs]

**How do you think people will know they're playing a bona fide George A Romero game?**

Oh man, give me a break [laughs]. Wait 'til you see it and you'll feel my touch.

**How familiar are you with games that take obvious inspiration from your work? The 1990 computer game, *Zombi*, for example, is a direct lift of Dawn Of The Dead. How do such 'tributes' make you feel?**

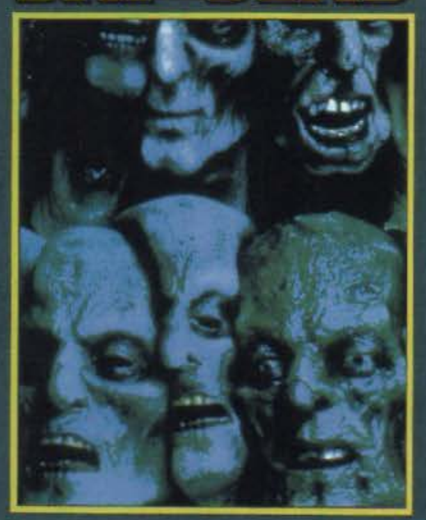
Well, it's always flattering – it's just like when people make films that are, what do you call them, rip-offs or homage? Of course, it's flattering. The *Resident Evil* ones are the only ones that I have any familiarity with.

**What's your opinion of the movies that have been made from videogames, such as the *Resident Evil* series and *House Of The Dead*?**

I'm prejudiced in my thoughts on *Resident Evil* because I worked on it and I thought my script was better [laughs]. I have to say I didn't like it very much – I didn't think it did justice to the game. I thought it could have been a terrific movie. *House Of The Dead* – something else again. I don't know the game well enough so I really don't know.

**How closely do you expect your game to follow the themes of your Dead movies?**

It's in no way taken from my movies or previous characters; it reflects what I have loved and still love in the horror genre. I do have, as I say, some approvals to try and keep it true to my kind of lore.




Romero's movies include 1985's gory and dark-humoured Day Of The Dead, but the director says that his project with Hip "in no way" lifts from the Dead series. Don't expect Bub to make an appearance, then

**Your zombie movies often see prominent characters eventually dying yet, in videogames, the player's objective is commonly to keep people alive. What's your take on this apparent conflict?**

I don't think it's a conflict. I've kept people alive since Dawn and, in the film I'm finishing now, I consciously kept some humans and zombies alive so I could continue their story. This will have a much bigger release than any of my other films. If it's lucky enough to be a hit, they're going to want to see a sequel so I left it open that way. It's really the first film where all the principal characters die. I'd like to see games where there's more cooperation and interaction between players. One of the themes I've always used in my films is the lack of communication – people can probably come out much better if they just talk to each other. This is part of the direction we're heading in with this game – making people play together.

**Finally, do you get to play many videogames yourself?**

I don't, I have to say – I only see them through my son's eyes. I don't have any hand-eye coordination [laughs]. I'm just fascinated by it as a medium. I can't wait to be more involved and to become more educated in the field.

### Dead to dead

The Romero name is everywhere

**While Kuju happily details its progressing relationship with Romero – both parties binding enthusiasm to their every word – the director's name has already been linked to another videogame property elsewhere. American McGee, while working with Jerry Bruckheimer to bring Oz to the big screen, is following up the recent *Scrapland* with another supposed collaboration – *City Of The Dead*. The coincidence of this, Kuju's efforts and Romero's own Land Of The Dead suggests a lack of coordination between them all; the 'involvement' with the former has, perhaps, been overstated.**

**For his own part, Romero has effectively distanced himself entirely from McGee's project, citing the now ageing 'George Romero Presents...' deal as its source. *City* – an IP that McGee says will produce "the goriest game ever made" (concept art shown above) – still requires Romero's approval by the terms of the original agreement. First, perhaps, it might help to gain his interest.**




The things people say about videogames

**"*Yars' Revenge* is consistently rated one of the best games of all time. And *E.T.* is consistently rated one of the worst games of all time. That means I have the greatest range of any game designer in history."**
**Howard Scott Warshaw** makes a statistically fair point

"When I told Nintendo of Europe that I was coming for the DS launch, they didn't believe me."
Nintendo Corporation Ltd president **Satoru Iwata** hints at the loneliness of being a European Nintendo fan

**"I obsessively play *Tetris*. I like the old-fashioned Game Boy, but I left mine on a plane."**
Actor **Patrick Stewart** prepares for some eBay action




## A FARMER'S LIFE FOR ME

**It may look at first glance like an unremarkable rack of desktop PC's, but this cluster of hardware – up for auction on eBay – is a certifiable goldmine. With their sale, *Ultima Online* player Rich Thurman hangs up his miner's helmet after two years of automated gold farming. During those two years he is reported to have amassed over nine billion gold pieces, which he then sold for a sum upwards of $106,000. If that figure alone isn't enough to give credence to the viability and importance of virtual worlds, consider 22-year-old Zachurm 'Deathifier' Emegen, who in December stumped up $26,500 of his own cold hard cash to purchase 6,000 acres of land in MMOG *Project Entropia*.**

● www.ebay.co.uk

INTERVIEW

# Wrighting wrongs

Will Wright talks DS demographics, EA spouses and life after The Sims

A surprise guest at the DS launch announcement in Paris, *The Sims* creator **Will Wright** gave a passionate speech describing his relationship with Nintendo since *SimCity* on the SNES, and praising the company's passion for innovation. But after ten years of life devoted to the Sims, and the integration of Maxis into EA's main campus at Redwood Shores, is Wright heading in a new direction?

**Nintendo argues that the DS is necessary because gaming has become too complicated. Is its analysis correct – that there are serious barriers for new players to overcome?**
Yeah, I do agree with that, actually, because of the customers we see playing *The Sims*, these people don't play games at all and that's a huge market. I think Iwata-san's right to say that we have to step back and say, 'Who are all the people who are not playing games, and why are they not playing games?' And it's because they see games as something which require a big time investment, something with an elaborate control mechanism, something where you're really going to have to apply yourself to, to learn the skill to play games. And that basically closes the door to a huge potential market.

**The Sims was always much less goal-oriented than many other PC games. So it was a pretty large stretch to try to make it a very goal-oriented console experience**

**But *The Sims* is the game that widens the market, and you do it by presenting a world which everyone is equally familiar with, using technology everyone is comfortable with. Nintendo's answer is to invent a machine that everyone is equally unfamiliar with. Is that a mistake?**
In terms of hardware it's a strange combination of features, and whether that's going to translate into people who've never played games seeing the machine and going 'I have to have that' remains to be seen. But looking at some of the software – things like *Nintendogs* – that's one of those things that I can show to non-gamers and they're going to want to try it. The problem is that it's a chicken-and-egg situation. If there's people who aren't playing games, then why should we be making games for them if they're not buying them? So what needs to happen is someone needs to make a couple of existence proofs and get these people to buy a few games, and then suddenly we've demonstrated that the market is there and people might start trying to cater to them.

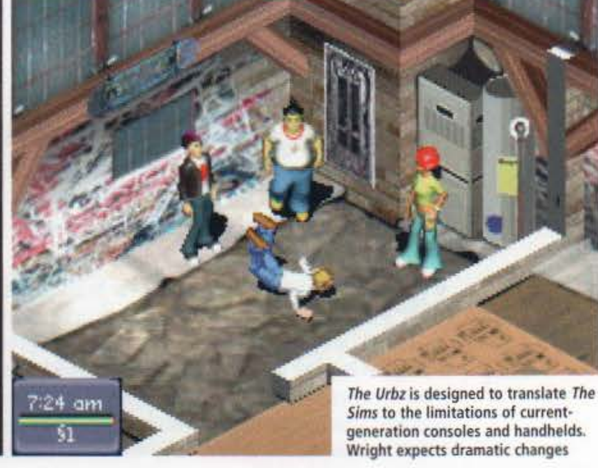
**Isn't it a big risk for Nintendo to take?**
I think it's a tactical risk, but I think not taking that risk is a strategic blunder. I think for a while in the US games were in danger of becoming the next comic books, which in the US have very specific connotations which they don't have in Japan – in the US, comic books have become very marginalised and associated with kids, and I think games were at the point where they were going to be marginalised in the same way, but we've managed to break out of that.

**Moving on to *The Urbz*: it's widely perceived as being more of an 'EA game' than a 'Maxis game' – is that a fair way of looking at it?**
Well, our first console version of *The Sims* was *Bustin' Out*, which was pretty much taking what we could of *The Sims* and bringing it to the console, but the console had a lot of limitations: it didn't have a mouse, it didn't have much storage, it didn't have connectivity. And because of that it started evolving in different directions, and because of that we decided that it would be better to cut it away from *The Sims* and let it speciate and become its own thing, and that's when we renamed it *The Urbz*. So to some extent it's a continuing experiment.

**The idea behind *The Urbz* was to widen the appeal of a game that already appeals to an unusually wide demographic, and yet it doesn't seem to have captured people's imagination the way *The Sims* did. Has it worked out the way you expected it to?**
It hasn't really gone the way we expected it to, but then again it's a brand-new market for us, and a brand-new demographic – a much younger audience. It's kind of hard because on the console side games tend to be even more goal-oriented than on the PC side – and *The Sims* was always much less goal-oriented than many other PC games. So it was a pretty large stretch in terms of where *The Sims* was on the PC to try to make it a very goal-oriented console experience that 12-year-old boys would want to play. But at the same time a lot of the core appeal of *The Sims* was to women, and when you look at the console demographic, you're getting further and further








*The Urbz* is designed to translate *The Sims* to the limitations of current-generation consoles and handhelds. Wright expects dramatic changes

away from that audience. So, it feels to me like *The Urbz* is climbing its own hill, and we're not quite sure how high that hill is going to be.

**It's been a few months now – how has the integration of Maxis into EA's main campus at Redwood worked out?**

It's been a little rocky. There was the integration into EA and then at the same time all these projects were reaching completion – *The Sims 2* and *The Urbz* – but I think the dust is beginning to settle. The upside is that people who had been working on *The Sims* for years are now deciding that they want to move to other projects within EA, and the people who were working on sports projects are deciding they want to come and play on *The Sims*, so now we have the mobility of things across projects. But it is a challenge when you're dealing with that many people in one location, the management challenge of building software with that much complexity – especially for the next-generation consoles – is extraordinary. The management challenge is every bit as hard as the technical challenge – how do you handle managing teams of 150 people and getting them all to pull in the same direction?




*Nintendogs* uses the interface of the DS's touchscreen and microphone to let players train and pet their virtual puppies. Similar in its lack of traditional game goals to Wright's titles, it's no surprise he feels it has the potential to sell DS to non-gamers

**EA's management practices have been under a lot of scrutiny over the last few months. Have you felt a cultural shift?**

Well, I've been rather insulated from that, because I'm working with a new team and we've moved to a new studio, so I can't tell you what working at Redwood Shores is like because I don't [laughs]. But I think that everything that's happened with EA Spouse and the blogs has got a lot of visibility within the industry and it's started a lot of discussions. It's not just an EA issue, it's happening in a lot of other places, but I'd like to see EA take the lead on it, and I've had discussions with lots of executives – I think EA needs to be seen as acknowledging this issue and being very proactive about it. But it's a very hard problem because if your competitor is working long hours and you're not, guess what? You're going to go out of business and lose your job. So there's no easy answer, but I think acknowledging that there's an industry-wide issue is the first step.

**Is that kind of pressure inevitable with the size of modern development projects?**

I think there are three axes here: number one is the complexity of what we're trying to build, number two is the timescale we have to build it, and three is the size of the team. And so if we're trying to increase the complexity of what we make, but the timescale stays the same, then the size of the team has to go up. But that has inherent inefficiencies. The inefficiencies you get with a team of 150 people is astounding, even with the best management practices, relative to what you get with a team of 50 people. It just snowballs. Something between those three axes has to change – and I don't know which one, if we have to limit content, or extend development cycles, but something has to give.

**But surely the perception at the moment is that game complexity has to increase and increase and increase?**

See, I don't think that's the case. I think that we need to make a fundamental change in the way we build games right now. I actually did a little graph of the ramp of people working on *Sim City* and the first game I did was one person, the first version of *Sim City* was four people, the next version was 15, the first version of *The Sims* was 25, the next version of *The Sims* was 120. That's exponential growth and if you take that trend outwards to 2050, it comes out to like 15 million people and five billion dollars a game! But if you look at what was making that growth exponential, it's the content. The growth of programming teams is growing almost linearly, but it's the artists and modellers, that's the things that are exploding. And we need to look at how we're doing that and not brute force the problem. It's one of the things I'm looking at in new projects – I'm really interested in solving that problem.

**In your DS presentation you talked about discovering new genres. Do you think the idea of defined genres holds the industry back?**

I think a lot of designers don't think in those terms, but they're forced to sell their ideas. You know, if someone came up to a publisher with *Katamari Damacy*, and the publisher said: "OK, what genre is it?" then they'd have to invent something - they'd have to call it a 'thirdperson roller', they'd have to couch it in genres to even get funding. I think that as a language it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because people look at the charts and say: "Oh RPGs are up 15 per cent, we need more RPGs." So basically everyone is camping on the same peak, and it's hard for people to pitch something completely new and hope that people like it. But we need to do it, and especially the companies that have successful franchises like EA, then it's incumbent upon you to take creative risks on the next franchise, to throw a dart out there and take a risk.

**But isn't EA perceived as the company which does that least?**

Well, they're letting me do it... [Smiles]

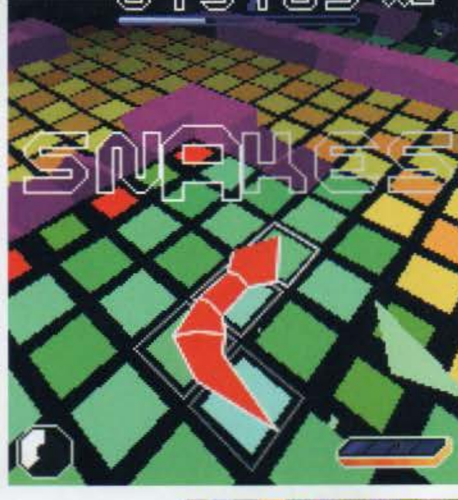


MOBILE

# Snakes alive

Nokia updates the oldest phone game for its flagship gaming phone






Combo 'power paths', letter-collecting games and speed-up and brake pads add complexity

With very little in the way of prior build-up, Nokia has been defiantly viral in the release of its new vision of *Snakes*. Developed by Iomo, the game is designed to be spread from N-Gage to N-Gage via bluetooth, and is available for free download at www.snakesoutbreak.com. So far, Nokia seems elated with its reception – **Simon Etchells**, director of title marketing, claims a million unique hits for the site in its first week. No download numbers are available as yet, but there seems no reason for every N-Gage owner not to get hold of a copy.

The idea seems calculated to evangelise the N-Gage's capabilities – take the most basic phone game, and ramp up its presentation and complexity. Etchells says: "I'm not sure I'd call it basic – simple, maybe. It's the game you played 200 years ago on your wind-up phone and it's the perfect way to show off the N-Gage's capabilities."

So far the game is only available for the N-Gage handset and, despite persistent rumours, Etchells couldn't comment on the possibility of Nokia's trademark game becoming available on other Nokia hardware.

The game itself is visually striking, and a much more varied proposition than the soothing, stressful monotony of the original. Fast and fluid, it only occasionally makes you long for a snappier response from the N-Gage's D-pad.

There's no question that it's a must-have for N-Gage owners, but it remains to be seen if it can make the handset any more desirable to the wider market.



A top-down – and rather hypnotic – view is available for old-school 2D stalwarts

## Continue

**www.edge-online.com**
Only recently launched, and only the beginning...

**Californian games**
Some of this West Coast stuff is looking terrific

**Survival horror**
We *still* can't get enough of it. Bring on *Siren 2*

## Quit



**Survival horror slashes**
Boo to the censored Japanese *Resident Evil 4*

**'Jungle Beat palm'**
A recognised medical condition in waiting

**Accusations of theft**
Apparently, **Edge** stole New Games Journalism!




### KAFKA ON THE SHORE

**Tragedy, sex and social exclusion from Japan**

Despite being the best-known Japanese author, at least internationally, Haruki Murakami has always had something of the outsider about his work. Perhaps this comes from years spent living in Europe and the US and the experience of exclusion from traditional Japanese society following his return. There are certainly elements of rebellion and rejection running through the magical realism of Kafka On The Shore. A delicate dance of intertwined characters – a 15-year-old runaway whose father is murdered, a retired simpleton who can talk to cats, a one-hit pop star who has since rejected society – each find themselves driven by forces beyond their control into situations they long to overcome. The title may hint at a western school of existentialism but the heart of Kafka On The Shore is more akin to a Greek tragedy. One character remarks: "I wish I had a chorus singing me what to do next". But for all the literary hinterland, there's plenty of Murakami's characteristic playfulness, too. A shadowy figure who appears as brand characters such as Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders is one example. There's also the regular diversion of real (and imaginary) sex – after all, this is a book with a hormonal 15-year-old hero. And throughout, the plot is punctuated with tiny snapshots of Japanese culture, everything from miso soup to love poems. So even with a somewhat Twin Peaksian (series two) denouement to some of the more outlandish occurrences, it remains an excellent and extremely enjoyable example of Murakami's craft.




### WRONG ABOUT JAPAN

**A complex picture of Japanese life and culture through the eyes of a father and son**

A different take on Japan comes courtesy of Booker award-winner Peter Carey. Now living in New York, the Australian author decides to take a trip in the company of his diffident 12-year-old son, Charley, who is obsessed with Japanese culture, notably manga and anime. "But only if there's no Real Japan," Charley explains. And this remains the central dichotomy of the book; how the traditional Japan of temples, museums and the tea ceremony clashes with the hyper-modernism of Akihabara Electric Town, Mobile Suit Gundam and i-mode phones. Like a crash course in finding your way, Carey and son dash around Tokyo, quizzing notables including a samurai swordsmith acclaimed as a national treasure and the creator of the Gundam series, who confesses he invented it purely to sell toy robots. There are also the notable hiccups: eating in a gangster-owned restaurant; the four-hour Kabuki theatre production; bumping into Charley's Japanese friend working behind the counter of Mister Donut. With his novelist mind in overdrive, Carey attempts to build up the parallels and contrasts into an overall picture of this, to outsiders at least, schizophrenic society. But, like many before him, he's confounded at almost every turn. Even the simplest task of interviewing someone through a filter of different cultures and a translator becomes an insurmountable barrier. As one of his friends warns Carey on his return to New York: "Be careful, half knowledge is sometimes much more worse than complete ignorance".





A DEVELOPER'S DIARY

## Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades continues his next-gen push

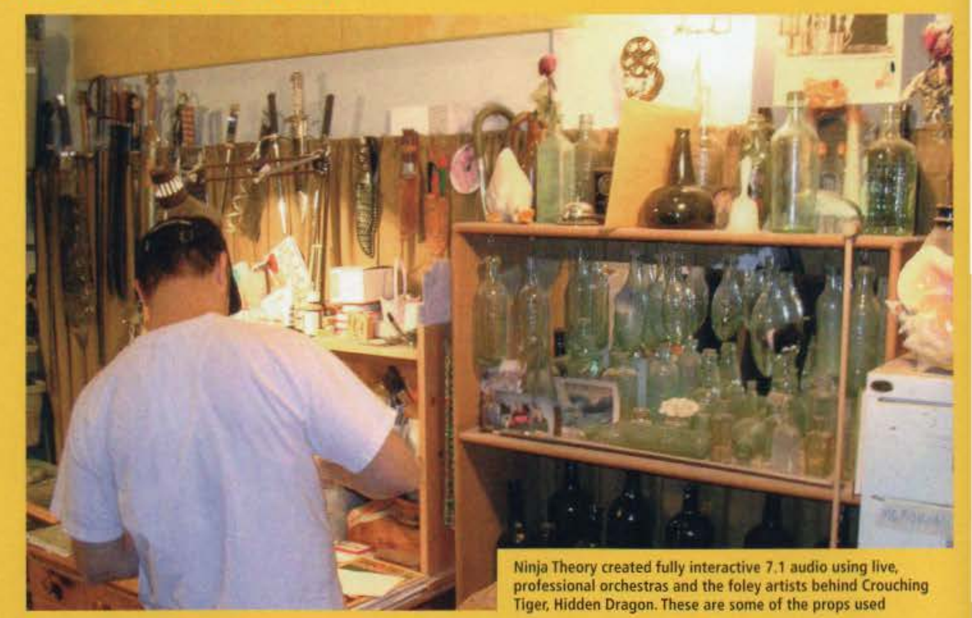
Arriving at San Jose for GDC 2004 in March, we have three gruelling days of presentations lined up with publishers. No one has seen our *Heavenly Sword* demo and I am a nervous wreck: short of breath, clammy hands and pounding heart.

My biggest fear is that our work would not look impressive enough. Several developers have come out with next-gen tech demos that look spectacular. But a tech demo is a tech demo: an isolated and narrow demonstration of technology using the entire processing and memory resources of the latest high-end PC under the dangerous assumption that it will be practical on next-gen consoles.

We went in a different direction: to create a playable next-gen game experience that ran smoothly and in realtime on a current PC. It had to look better than any game out there, show brand-new areas of gaming, be fun to play and, well... the sum of its parts just needed to feel next-gen.

As we are presenting alongside all of our parent

**His face is flushed, his mouth is open and he's shaking his head. He whispers softly into Nina's ear, "It's beautiful... It's the best looking game I have ever seen." Blimey!**



Ninja Theory created fully interactive 7.1 audio using live, professional orchestras and the foley artists behind Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. These are some of the props used

company's products, we only have five minutes to impress per meeting: nine months of work from 23 people boiled down to five minutes. Had we done enough? Will we meet next-gen expectations? Will our work stand up to the competition?

As I'm blowing onto my clammy right hand to dry it out, our first appointment walks in representing a large Japanese company. Throughout the demo, he remains stoic and emotionless, never asks a question and lets himself out at the end without comment. And that was that. My fears and anxieties resurface and I begin to feel faint as the next publisher walks into our tiny booth.

I discreetly glance over at him during the demo. His face is flushed, his mouth is open and he's shaking his head. He whispers softly into Nina's ear, "It's beautiful..." followed by "It's the best looking game I have ever seen." Blimey!

As he's leaving, Mr Stoic surprises us at the door. He is accompanied by some stoic colleagues asking for another demo. He tells the others: "You are about to see what a next-gen game looks like."

Later, another publisher rep comes in complaining to Jez [San] that the few next-gen demos he has seen lack creativity, gameplay or feeling. Jez, Nina, Mike and I all spontaneously smile at each other before kicking off the demo. He remains silent throughout after which he slaps his hands over his head: "Fuck! Now that's exactly what I needed to see!"

The demos continue throughout the day and into the night in Jez's hotel suite. Fear turns to relief and relief turns to enjoyment as more publishers see the demo.

"I'm speechless," says one guy after a long pause. "It's stunning!"

"This is a video, right?" asks another. I offer him the controller to prove that it is running in realtime.

One other guy just sits there during and after the demo repeating to himself: "I don't understand. This is a film. It's not a game." I explain how the game works to make sure he doesn't think it's some kind of lame interactive movie but his eyes just seem vacant. "I don't understand," he finally responds. We seem to have genuinely shocked him!

We presented to acquisition people, CEOs, hardware engineers, Hollywood agents, outsourcers and licensors – and the response was universally OTT.

One publisher rep even follows us around everywhere in the evenings, buying us drinks and nervously eyeing us up every time we go away to talk to someone.

This kind of response was way beyond anything we had believed possible and the effects were dizzying and more than a little surreal.

As a result of the GDC trip we moved up the publishing chain and have now booked a slew of major presentations set for E3 in May 2004. Between GDC and E3, we expanded the prototype into new areas: a vastly improved combat engine, realtime armies, online play and more. We wanted to cover all risk areas to make sure that signing would be as easy as possible for a publisher.

With Argonaut's financial year ending on July 31, we had six weeks to make our case, get through the due diligence process and negotiate a contract. That's a blink of an eye in the publishing world.

I remember commenting to Nina and Mike on the way to the E3 event in May: "If we can't get signed after this kind of response, there's no hope for original game development."

And, over the next few months, I started to lose all hope.



## INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
### Doukutsu Monogatari

agtp.romhack.net/doukutsu.html (Windows)
www.eonet.ne.jp/~fuge/nakiwo/software.htm (Mac)

For a game created by a team of one in – the story goes – just three weeks, *Doukutsu Monogatari* (*Cave Story*) has a level of polish and depth that could easily elevate it from freeware diversion to instant classic. Lone artist, musician and programmer Pixel has crafted a tale of a prototypical anonymous mute hero questing through diverse regions of a mammoth cave, helping the bunny-eared Mimiga escape the reign of a nefarious doctor and his henchmen.

Counterbalancing the syrupy sweet character art, throughout your adventure you gain a heavy arsenal of ever-more-destructive weaponry, each with its own strategic advantages, which can be levelled up by collecting the energy chips that cascade from your fallen foes.

*Doukutsu* pays tribute to the classics, most notably *Metroid*, but with the addition of distinctly modern physics and graphic flourishes, plus secrets galore and multiple endings. Aeon Genesis' new English translation eliminates all previous frustrations, making this an essential download.

# INCOMING

## Announcements and updates

### Metal Gear Acid

**FORMAT:** PSP
**PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
**EXPECTED:** MARCH



*Acid*'s US release includes a twoplayer versus mode previously cut to make Japanese launch. Whether the barmily near-to-the-knuckle plot will be censored as a trade-off remains to be seen

### Ibara

**FORMAT:** ARCADE
**PUBLISHER:** AMI
**EXPECTED:** TBA



The Year of the Gun continues: Cave's latest has quickened hearts not just for its impeccable track record, but also because it seems to show the influence of ex-Raizing (*Sokyugurentai*) staff

### Castlevania: Curse Of Darkness

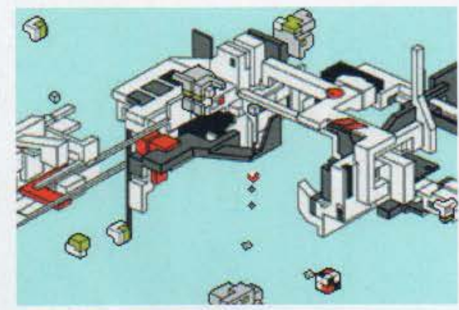
**FORMAT:** PS2
**PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
**EXPECTED:** Q3 2005



PS2, meanwhile, gets a second 3D Belmont instalment, but now with a flowing castle environment (hopefully not at the expense of sumptuous Gothic splendour) and a new demonic ally system

### Retro Atari Classics

**FORMAT:** DS
**PUBLISHER:** ATARI
**EXPECTED:** Q1



*Asteroids, Breakout, Tempest, Centipede* and six more go touch-play and wireless, as well as getting optional 'tagged' reworkings from graffiti artists (Delta's terrifying *Asteroids* pictured here)

### Castlevania for DS (working title)

**FORMAT:** DS
**PUBLISHER:** KONAMI
**EXPECTED:** Q3 2005



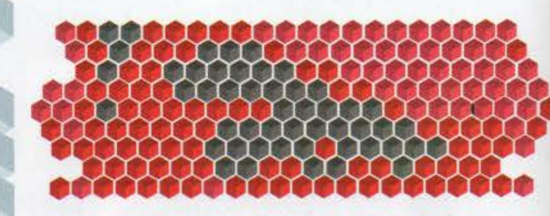
Having thrived on GBA, 2D *CV* moves to the DS with *Symphony Of The Night*-quality looks (several sprites seem to have migrated intact) and a magic seal-drawing system to finish off bosses

### Mobile Suit Gundam: One Year War

**FORMAT:** PS2
**PUBLISHER:** BANDAI
**EXPECTED:** MARCH




*OYW* is Namco's first take on the Gundam licence. Coded by the *Soul Calibur II* team, it mixes aerial and ground scenarios by allowing the player to fight on the hulls of passing spacecraft



## REDEYE IS...

**Diverging**



RedEye is standing on a level crossing, waiting to prove the world wrong. It's been one of those months. Sunlight glints off the tracks, the air is still and sharp. RedEye takes a breath and wishes there was an audience. It's marketing men who have driven things to this point, or rather it's the pause between marketing men opening their mouths and sound coming out that has driven things to this point. That endless microsecond while the triumphant, smug grin begins to emerge and the lips form the word. That word. 'Convergence'. So RedEye is standing on a level crossing, wishing he had an audience. And a pointer.

Ahead of him, the tracks stretch into the distance. Perfectly straight, perfectly parallel, heading for the horizon. When they get there, they meet, shimmering in the sun – or at least they appear to. Two things that never touch, joined in something known as the vanishing point. RedEye raises his imaginary pointer and declares: 'Convergence is a mirage'.

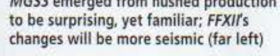
It's a continuing, infuriating mystery: how did such a nebulous word get its teeth so deep into a whole industry? It's taken as a given that this unproven concept is the blueprint for the future, but the evidence is overwhelmingly against it. The examples that work – the clock-radio, the camera-phone, the PS2 DVD player – are single-figured. And they're usually cons. No one uses their phone for real photos, no one settles down to listen to Front Row on that bit of green-lit Alba plastic they bought from Argos. The real trend sees the number of gadgets in your bag – phone, camera, MP3 player, Game Boy – increasing. The only convergence the world is really hungry for is streamlined power adapters, exhausted from lugging their own bodyweight in cables and transformers around the world.

Convergence only works when something can be added which has no impact on the job you bought the device to do in the first place. When its cost, form and function are largely unaffected by the addition: people like getting things for free. The moment something is conceived as a convergence device, the stink of compromise starts to spread. Why pay more for something that does more things less well? For something that may break, go flat, become obsolete and knock out your comms and entertainment in one miserable swoop?

Convergence is a myth, a mirage – a real chimera, with the head of a marketing man and the body of a market analyst: a brain made of stupid and a heart made of greed. Trying to pile more things into the same, straining pot is a preposterous idea. Augmentation and flexibility are the point: the model isn't the mythical all-in-one uber-gadget. The ultimate convergence device we have is the notepad – diary, phonebook, sketchpad, paper aeroplane kit and emergency origami ashtray supply all in one. If the industry keeps chasing the former, they might as well join RedEye on the level crossing. And it's beginning to shake.

*Redeye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with those of* ***Edge*** *magazine*



*MGS3* emerged from hushed production to be surprising, yet familiar; *FFXII*'s changes will be more seismic (far left)

# SOMETHING ABOUT Japan







## One year ends and another begins...

Koji Aizawa, editor in chief of Famitsu PS2 magazine, on a new year's revolution

**Well, Nintendo's DS and Sony's PSP were, without any doubt, the big players at the end of 2004. Nintendo has already sold 1.5 million DS units in Japan, while Sony shifted around 500,000 PSPs – which was also the same amount as the most popular DS titles like *Sawaru Made In Wario* and *Super Mario 64 DS* sold over the end-of-year period.**

The reason for this gap between the PSP and DS numbers can be in part explained by the very small number of PSPs Sony made available on the market. While I'm writing this column (in January), Sony's portable is still hard to find in shops in Tokyo. When you play with the PSP on the subway, since the machine is so rare, people are very curious to see what you're playing with. From a pure gaming perspective, the DS is much more popular and well-known now – but when people see the PSP's graphics, they are very surprised, and this makes it desirable.

Perhaps because there are still so few games, I started to explore the other potentials of my PSP. I tried many things, such as recording and encoding videos to watch on the go, using it as an MP3 player, and viewing the pictures I took with my digital camera. I'll be straight with you: using the PSP for other purposes than playing games made me realise it has many weaknesses in these aspects. But, for the moment, I'm still very optimistic about the machine as the LCD quality is astonishing and, in principle, it will be possible to update the machine's operating system. So – again, in theory – these weaknesses may be corrected. And as the editor in chief of a videogame magazine, I'm certainly pleased that I can manage all the saves from my various PSP games on my PC!

**When you play with the PSP on the subway people are very curious to see what you're playing with. The DS is much more well-known – but when people see the PSP's graphics, they are surprised, and this makes it desirable**

So, what have I been playing on these new portables? On DS I'm still enjoying *KimiShine* (*Feel The Magic XY/XX*), as well as puzzle games such as *Hitofude* (*One-Line Puzzle*) and *Zoo Keeper*. On PSP I still love *Ridge Racers*, and I have also been spending time with *Lumines* and *Dokodemo Issho*. And, as you're no doubt expecting me to say, away from the handhelds I had a great experience with *Dragon Quest VIII*, which I finished after having played it for 70 hours. The PS2 had a good end to the year overall, with many titles going far above the 100,000 sales mark – *Gran Turismo 4* sold around 790,000 copies after appearing at last, *Metal Gear Solid 3* around 740,000, and Namco's *Tales Of Rebirth* sold around 520,000. It's been an incredibly strong sales period for the Japanese videogame industry.

But now on to 2005. I guess everything will become clearer after E3 when the first elements of the next generation of home consoles will be revealed. Like other observers, I'm pretty sure that




Cars continue to sell PlayStation2s, be they studious recreations of reality (left) or studious recreations of *Ridge* (below)

Those 1,000 PSP slips weren't quite golden tickets, sparing Ken Kutaragi the Wonka analogies, but it was close

*Kiminotamenara Shineru*, aka *Feel The Magic XY/XX*, aka *Project Rub* (below) joins the ranks of games with a wildly different title for each territory. Japanophiles face the agonising choice of the native release title or production title

Microsoft will fire first and release its new Xbox at the end of this year. If Japan's major game makers can be convinced to move on to this new generation and bring some of their popular titles to the machine, I still think Microsoft could do well in Japan, at least much better than it did with the first Xbox.

As for Nintendo and Sony, the questions are numerous, which should make their announcements even more interesting. Can Nintendo's new project really bring about a revolution in home gaming? Will Sony's Blu-Ray disc format go the way of Betamax? (Well, I'm sure this won't actually happen.) And then there are the major games for this generation that are finally reaching the end of their marathon developments, like *Kingdom Hearts 2* and especially *Final Fantasy XII*, which fans in Japan are very excited about. There are also game makers who, even if they have seemed to be quiet recently, have big ambitions for this year, like Sega and Capcom. So don't worry, you can expect a few surprises from Japan as well!

# Hype

The future of electronic entertainment



## **Edge**'s most wanted

### Sam & Max: Freelance Police



**On, off and now, thanks to another reported Lucasarts snub, still off. Will Bad Brains' point 'n' click – needed by the genre, wanted by everyone – ever see a release?**
TBA, TBA

### Fahrenheit



**It wasn't just New York that froze over for the ambitious, startling psychothriller, but relations with (now ex-)publisher Vivendi, too. Happily, it's found a new home.**
PC, PS2, XBOX, TBA

### Wanda And Collossus



**After hoping for so long, it's still hard to believe that *Ico 2* is real – harder still to take in the exceptional art and bold design choices in Sony's brave giant killer.**
PS2, SCEI

## Let's get together
### Can PlayStation Portable make PlayStation sociable?



**The PSP has already proved its worth as a singleplayer machine, but what is its true potential once developers start taking full advantage of its wireless capabilities?**

Will Sony's PSP change your life? Rob Hill thinks it will. His game, *Untold Legends*, wants you to get out and play, cooperatively, with local PSP owners any time, anywhere. It wants you to play with strangers and then meet them as friends, and this idea represents a quiet gaming revolution. The first obstacle to this new gaming community is simply numbers – it's a long way from launch-day scarcity to the ubiquity of a 21st century Walkman. If setting up a local game of *Legends* means happening to be near someone else who happens to have a PSP and happens to be playing *Legends* and happens to be looking for a coop game, then it's likely only the most relentlessly extroverted will persevere.

The second is more a question of sociology. Multiplayer gaming has traditionally been among groups of friends in an intimate environment or groups of strangers shielded by the buffer of the internet. This is a strange new hybrid, a social situation which threatens to collide awkwardness and intimacy. Multiplayer etiquette has already proved a complex and unpredictable beast, and this new arena raises a whole raft of new questions. What will you do when your PSP informs you that it's found a local player? Leap to your feet and wave? Pace from one end of a university library to another, flashing covert glances at anyone who seems fascinated by their own lap? Or will you keep your head down, hoping that awkward conversational niceties don't destroy the companionable silence of coordinate hacking and slashing?

A lot depends on how the PSP evolves. How will you communicate with remote players, whether local or global? Will that transparent keyboard ever become available? Will it support headsets? Will you want it to if you're somewhere public? Nintendo, for now, has a more modest policy: its focus is on playing with your friends, on fitting gaming into social situations which already exist. However, as the DS matures and takes advantage of its wireless capabilities, the social experiment of, say, massively multiplayer *Mario Kart* communities becomes a distinct possibility. But, for now, the PSP is leading the way, showing that, for all the "it's 'just' a PS2 in your pocket" jibes, it has the potential to change forever the way games fit into our lives.



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH (US)**

# Untold Legends: Brotherhood Of The Blade

## SOE convinced thousands of perfect strangers to meet at EverQuest cons: this time it's looking for just four to work lunch breaks and commutes

The PSP's launch line-ups have relied heavily on established names, but SOE's action-RPG declines the opportunity to use the one with the biggest clout of all, instead offering a new world for the new platform. "We wanted to try and explore some new gameplay mechanics and story ideas that wouldn't fit within the *EverQuest* universe," explains producer **Rob Hill**, "particularly in the area of how the individual characters play. By not limiting ourselves to existing character types we could give the game a more unique feel."

While details on the abilities of those four types – Alchemist, Berserker, Druid and Knight – are scarce beyond their expertise in bludgeoning monstrous hordes, their atypical looks bode well, as does the ominous setting. The game opens with evil baying at the gates of the players' home city, Aven, drawing them together in the titular Brotherhood to strike out at its source. Each character is balanced to work efficiently as either a lone hero or member of a wirelessly connected fourplayer party: "When more players are added, the monsters get tougher, but the advantage of multiplayer is that characters have skills that can benefit those around them as well as themselves," Hill says.

> "At its heart, this is a fast-paced action game, which should immediately appeal to new players. Deeper in, they're introduced to elements a more RPG-literate crowd enjoys"

The randomly generated wilderness of Unataca has long since fallen to the threat encroaching on Aven, so beyond the city walls you can expect little charity, but not correspondingly little story structure. It's not *Legends'* intent to sacrifice RPG depth for accessibility, Hill reasoning that the action-RPG formula already has the perfect balance for newcomers and veterans alike: "At its heart, this is a fast-paced action game, which should immediately appeal to new players unfamiliar with RPGs. As they get deeper in, they're introduced to the elements that a more RPG-literate crowd enjoys so much."

Aside from accessibility, the other issue with depth is the potentially irregular nature of handheld play – all SOE's experience with groups divided by away-from-keyboard breaks can't compare to adventuring parties that only last the distance between train stops. Sensibly, it's possible to save your game at any point during play (with the notable exception of boss battles), and multiplayer supports drop-in, drop-out functionality.





***Legends'* camera zoom level can be altered during play with the D-pad: this closest setting may be slightly impractical for navigation, but is the ideal view for inspecting your character's (customisable) equipment**

"When a player joins a game in progress, they can save their character at any time and maintain all of the progress they achieved in that game," explains Hill. "They can then import that progress back into their singleplayer experience and continue on their own, so it's viable to play some quick games and still get something out of it." 'Viable' is a good choice of word considering the insatiable one-more-dungeon nature of *Legends'* predecessors from *NetHack* on up, something Hill's professional opinion supports: "That said, having played a lot of multiplayer myself, I'd imagine that people would also set aside large amounts of time to make significant progress. Connecting is such a breeze that what often starts as a few minutes of game time extends into hours."

As could be expected of an online multiplayer-focused developer, it's the PSP's connectivity that *Legends* seizes on, intended to ensure that assembling the Brotherhood takes as little of your play time as possible. "One of the coolest things that came out of the project is the pick-up aspect," enthuses





**Aura spells (right) are impressively presented: as in the *Champions* games, it's likely fellow players will also gain the bonuses such spells bestow by huddling inside the arcane bubble**





*Legends* doesn't shirk from mobbing players with monsters, although hopefully the random generation should ensure enough twists and turns to thin the numbers out a little. Recruiting another three shieldmates seems like a sound idea, even with the corresponding bump-up in monster resilience







Controls are smartly mapped out, with the right shoulder button acting as a toggle between the two sets of face button functionality – either chugging potions and attacking, or providing hotkey access to previously assigned abilities






Hill. "We'll be sitting around talking, pick up the PSPs and start playing – there's no cables or much preparation at all, someone will just say: 'Hey, you want to play a bit?'"

It's exactly the kind of easy, communal functionality we've seen in the best communication-based DS titles – the test will be whether the Blade Brothers can prove as enjoyable a shared experience as the *Band Brothers*. What *Legends* has in its favour is cooperative play, a surprising rarity among the competitive multiplayer of other PSP titles (which play out as curiously aloof matches of furious concentration and awkward personal space avoidance), and if the gameplay is strong enough to support a community, there's every reason one could form.

Hill is optimistic, clearly as interested in his players as his game: "Most online communities are typically people far away from each other, and *Legends* supports wi-fi internet access as well, so it could easily mimic the existing ones. But the really exciting aspect is local play. When you boot up, find a game someone in the vicinity has created and start playing, you know that person is local and could even find out who it is. So instead of an anonymous player you chat with through a keyboard, you can actually meet them face to face immediately. That's something that really hasn't been possible until now."

It's also something that would be a bigger adventure than anything *Legends*' designers have prepared – no slight intended on their storytelling skills – a multiplayer RPG that requires the players' social lives to be as eventful as those of their characters.

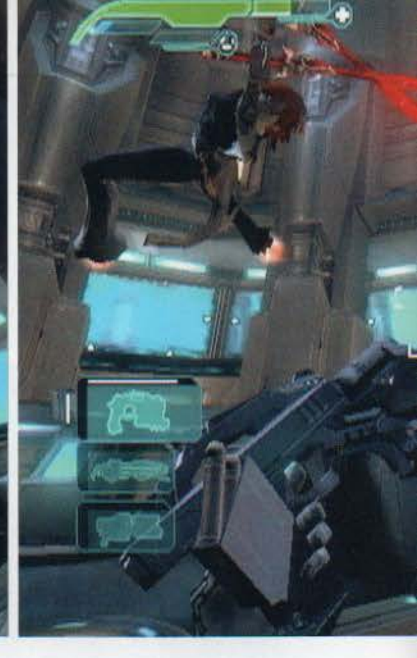


**PlayStation, portable**

**SOE may be best known for its PC titles, but it has also experimented with console and mobile development. "The team has quite a bit of experience with portable gaming," Hill says. "Our lead engineer worked on *EverQuest* for the Pocket PC, and we have engineers and designers from our mobile games. But bringing in other team members that were new to the medium allowed us to look beyond what most people think a portable game is capable of – we designed more in terms of a PlayStation title, then tailored the aspects that had to be considered for a portable device."**



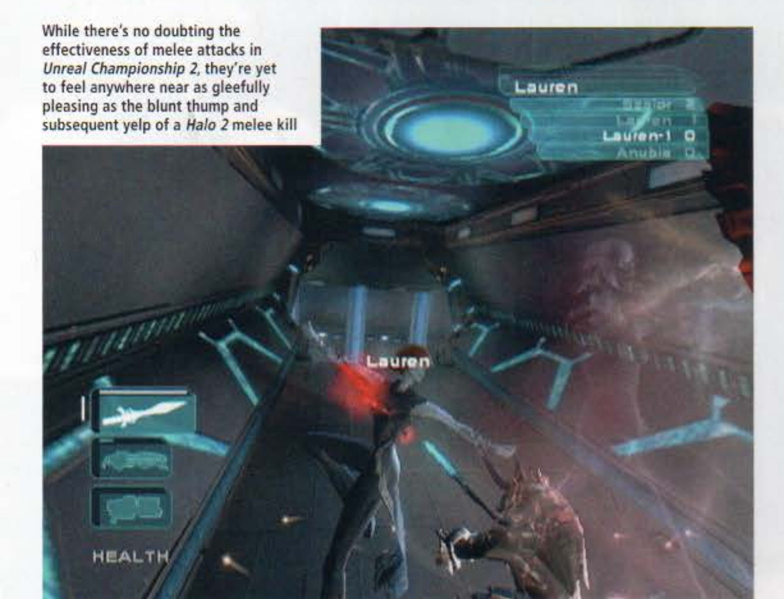


FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **APRIL 18**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

# Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict

Epic's firstperson shooter goes thirdperson, and then back again, as often as you like




**While there's no doubting the effectiveness of melee attacks in *Unreal Championship 2*, they're yet to feel anywhere near as gleefully pleasing as the blunt thump and subsequent yelp of a *Halo 2* melee kill**

There's something of *Super Mario 64*'s self-defeating brilliance about *Halo 2*'s multiplayer mode. Just as Mario made 3D gaming seemingly perfect in one effortless triple jump, therefore satisfying one of the biggest prospects of the next generation before it had even truly arrived, so *Halo 2* is in danger of making all subsequent Xbox Live shooters obsolete also-rans, a redundant pursuit for all but the most capable or most heavily licensed of deathmatch games.

Before anything else, though, *Unreal Championship 2* does have a relative ace up its sleeve: the inclusion of bots, for offline skirmishes. As *Perfect Dark* and *Conker's Bad Fur Day* showed, a lack of human opposition can be far from a bad thing, especially if you're getting the whole screen to yourself. And *Unreal Championship 2*'s bots seem to have the basic wits of a deathmatch opponent down pat, as they take up useful sniping positions and use jump pads to launch themselves into death-from-above melee attacks. They're not morons, at least, which elevates them above the unthinking headshot fodder that crops up in far too many combat games nowadays.

There's plenty of variation in those bots, too, as the game features 14 different characters, wildly different in appearance, moderately different in stats and abilities, but all rendered in the kind of big-chested, camp-fantasy schlock that *Unreal* games seem to be able to get away with. Corny characters or not, they're impressively rendered, and give off an unmistakable glow in accordance with their team's colour.

Both first- and thirdperson modes are available, and the switch between them is fast and non-jarring. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, sure – thirdperson offers a greater view of the periphery, essential for performing high-speed melee ambushes without becoming clumsily disoriented, but leaves the player feeling less able to shoot so precisely and quickly at opponents with a lower or higher vantage point. Thanks to a sensible range of customisation options, though, the choice is up to you – you can configure your

**Coveted adrenaline and ultra-damage boosters could still encourage a camping culture, but overall the game feels less about domination through aggressive greed**



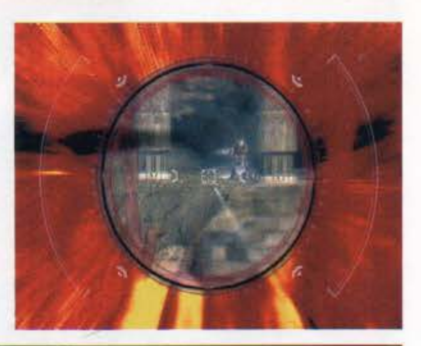



The dedicated deathmatch stages – such as Deadbolt, Remnant and Praxis – are rather compact in size, if not complexity. Far more expansive battlefields can be found via Capture The Flag mode, providing plenty of vantage for snipers






The Enforcer pistol duo is possibly the least enjoyable weapon to be found in the preview version of the game. Its primary fire mode is slow and seemingly worthless, while its secondary option needs to be charged up for too long to make it an effective option in a heated battle






There's a storyline in singleplayer mode – heroic Anubis fights to reclaim his people's Rite of Ascension tournament from the omnipotent Liandri Corporation – but it's unlikely that the campaign will leave the climes of the arena tournaments




Levels are well detailed, and the game moves at a speedy pace with no signs of struggle or strain from its engine. The garish futuristic settings make a welcome change from *Halo 2*'s assortment of admittedly beautiful rock-rough textures

perspective to change to your preferred view upon picking up, or changing between, certain weapons. Target Adhesion, a device seemingly set to become a standard for conscientious shooters during 2005, is available. Also mentioned in this month's Pivotal feature (see p48), it's the option to have your aiming reticule slow somewhat when you trace it across an enemy – a subtle piece of design that *Halo* managed to incorporate without anyone actually noticing.

Levels aren't littered with predefined weapon sets; the player has three slots that are decided before the match starts. One contains a standard failsafe weapon (the Enforcer pistols, for example), an explosive type (rocket launcher, flak cannon, etc) and energy type (sniper rifle, or the Stinger). These are activated by certain pickups in the levels, meaning that while your weapon choices are both crucial and limited, there's no demeaning dash at the start of each map to get the 'best' weapon, as with *Halo 2*, and nor is there such a feeling of powerlessness upon not managing to steal it first. Coveted super adrenaline and ultra-damage boosters could still encourage a camping culture, but overall the game feels less about domination through aggressive greed.

Certain other power-ups are handled with a more balanced approach, too. Your adrenaline meter allows you to activate a number of temporary status effects; holding down a face button on the pad brings up a three-pronged menu, allowing the player to choose how to use their adrenaline. Abilities include Nimble (giving you the capacity to perform comically high and long jumps) and Ethereal, an invisibility mode that conjures a nearby duplicate of the player as a useful distraction for enemy firepower. The adrenaline menu itself is initially a confusing and intrusive pop-up, but familiarity makes its use almost instant, and the widespread availability of refills means that there are fewer valuable power-up hotspots to force battles into stuttering chokepoints as players clamber for the essential edge.

This lack of distraction certainly adds to the game's feel of something more manic and less subtle than *Halo 2*. Bungie's deathmatching masterwork feels more measured and precise by comparison; it's only because of its seeming simplicity – pick up guns, and shoot others – and relative slowness that so much subtlety can be included, and detectably so. *Unreal Championship 2*, conversely, feels complex to begin with, but settles down into something less layered and more chaotic, through its quickness, double jumps, melee combos and the greater effort required to take an opponent down. Which is fine, of course. Such a game doesn't need to be as invisibly, endlessly fine-tuned as *Halo 2*, it just needs to feel really, really satisfying. If *Unreal Championship 2* manages to make speedy sniping and double kills truly gratifying – something that the extended playtime of a review will decide – then it could easily find a welcome home on Live.





## The crunch bunch

The roster of characters is varied in appearance, even if the three individual cast members we experienced formed an ID parade of *Streets Of Rage*-style clichés. Anubis is an Egyptian everyman, a balance of stamina and agility whose voice samples and putdowns are as crass, blunt and American as everyone else's. Lauren sports some spinning and dashing melee blade attacks and nifty agility but can take little damage. Szalor is the Skaarj tank, the lumbering bullet cushion capable of striking hard if he can find someone slow or unwitting enough to attack. There will be 14 distinct characters in the finished game, however, so there's hope for diversity beyond the fast/weak, slow/strong, average/average characteristics of ageing 2D beat 'em ups.




Like most of the game's collectibles, energy refills litter the maps, making moving in any direction as worthwhile as hovering around a spawn point. Rule-changing mutators are available to inhibit camping



*Infected* is thirdperson by default, but you can also deliver kindness from a firstperson view. A range of standard and viral guns are promised for crowd control

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **MAJESCO**
DEVELOPER: **PLANET MOON**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN (US), TBA (UK)**

# Infected

## The best video nasty never made is coming to PSP, as Planet Moon offers its take on the spirit of Christmas




Coloured auras differentiate between infected and innocents (right), but mistakes inariably happen with semi-automatic weapons. You could always rationalise a stray shot as being a fate better than falling prey to the corpulently bloated infected heavies





New York City's Christmas crowds are a force to be reckoned with at the best of times, let alone after the outbreak of a virus that induces insanity and cannibalism. It's the latter that provides the worst-case scenario for Planet Moon's PSP shooter, arriving on the system with a double-barrelled bang and a bah humbug.

"It's the art and sense of fun that makes it a Planet Moon game. The characters are just obviously ours, even though it's a much grittier game than those we've done since *MDK*," says producer **Aaron Loeb** with regard to the real-world setting (it's testament to Planet Moon's unique back catalogue that a zombie apocalypse seems soberly realistic by comparison). "The tone's darker than *Armed & Dangerous*, but the premise will certainly appeal to our fans."

The singleplayer heroine, NYPD cop Stevens, has the mixed blessing of a blood type that not only gives her immunity to the virus but also proves explosively volatile in contact with the infected. Outfitted with a 'viral gun' that treats bullets with blood from her arm for ballistic transfusions, and a second more traditional firearm for extra stopping power, it falls to her to take back New York, one bloodbath at a time.



Infected that erupt after being struck by viral shells can cause a chain reaction of gore that clears a whole mob, awarding a combo bonus and a brief pause to reflect on the humanity of men exploding over virgin snow before returning to the chaos

Even before *Infected* had entered development proper, Planet Moon was referring to it as an 'ultra-fast-paced action game', a design tenet that's at the pounding heart of its *Robotron: 2005* styling. "A handheld game should be about instant gratification," Loeb reasons. "The player should have a complete and satisfying experience in ten minutes, and that should be true on a fractal scale: every minute within those ten should also be complete and satisfying, not merely setting them up for a big finish."

Away from the ravening crowds of singleplayer, *Infected*'s multiplayer (both free-for-all and team deathmatch shootouts are on offer) uses the PSP's wireless connectivity to spread some viruses of its own. Defeat another player in wireless play and your deathmatch avatar will infect their game, running rampant in the singleplayer campaign; when that infected player triumphs in further multiplayer matches, your strain will continue to spread alongside theirs.

Internet ranking will chart the inexorable progress of your virus across the country and, ultimately, the globe – assuming unsporting players don't administer the antidote of deleting their data files. It's an interesting mutation of the hi-score table, and if the concept of your game becoming a case study of multiplayer defeats sounds like salt in a festering wound, you'll at least have endless opportunity for shotgun and airstrike payback.

One of the more exciting PSP prospects when it was just a name, *Infected* shows the huge potential of original titles built specifically for the machine: in the wait for the game's late-year release, we can only hope Planet Moon's understanding of the medium proves catchy.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **GENKI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

# Shutoko Battle: Zone Of Control

**Not content with having squeezed miles of Tokyo highway on to console, Genki is pocket-sizing them**

With the PSP receiving both Taito's *Densha De Go!* train sim and this version of Genki's downtown racer, Japanese PSP owners will soon be able to while away their Tokyo commutes by virtually commuting around Tokyo. *Ridge Racers'* success at adapting to the new format will have come as some relief to Genki, though *Shutoko Battle*'s development period has long overshot *Racers'* – no doubt due to the task of reworking the game's sprawling, streaming highways for the new hardware.

They appear to have survived largely intact, with some trade-off in texture resolution, although the cars are as sharply modelled as the customisation aspect demands. Perhaps to fend off *Need For Speed Underground*'s encroachment on to its turf, modding now includes under-car neons and more flamboyant paintwork; on the functional side of garage work, car tuning options maintain the series' usual standard.

The core gameplay follows the *Shutuko* canon: you freely roam the midnight overpasses and expressways of Tokyo in search of rival drivers to challenge, at which



point the Spirit Point gauges come into play. Points are lost for scratching walls, spinouts or direct collisions, and deplete faster when one driver pulls ahead, with the loser the first to run empty. New to the PSP version is a team battle mode, where you play as part of one of the Shutoko's gangs – multi-car duels alongside your allies determine your crew's expansion or contraction of territory.

The wireless multiplayer possibilities are huge, but Genki has yet to confirm even one-on-one: coaxing both heavy data streaming and wireless multiplay from its PSP debut may perhaps be more of a battle than the developer can handle.






*Shutoko*'s western appeal (where it goes under the *Tokyo Highway Racer* name) is cult at best, but the city freewheeling can prove strangely mesmerising – perhaps a factor in EA's adoption of the concept for its own *Need For Speed Underground 2*

# Another Code: Futatsu No Kioku

**That subtitle is 'Dual Memories' – possibly to be switched in the west to 'Honey, I Faked Our Deaths While We Built A Brainwashing Device'**

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **CING**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEB 24 (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E143**




***Another*** **mixes hand-drawn, realtime 3D and prerendered art to slightly off-kilter effect, but it seems to fit, for the most part, with the game's atmosphere. Its appearance on the European DS schedule is a welcome surprise**

Catching early attention at the DS' unveiling for the hand-drawn charisma of its heroine – who looks like Andy Warhol reincarnated as a young Tokyo hipster – *Another* has grown a more convoluted title in the lead up to its February release. The second adventure from the developer of *Glass Rose*, it appears the developer's style has found a better home on DS than with that PS2 outing.

Snow-haired Ashley's scientist parents supposedly died during the course of their work on a secret project codenamed 'Another', but her 14th birthday brings a package containing a dual-screened PDA and an invitation from her father to a remote island. Her foster parent has an accompanying revelation of her own: Ashley's father is alive, and has recently completed his work on the Another device.

The player steps in as Ashley sets out for the island: an overhead view allows her to be moved either with the D-pad or the stylus, the latter proving naturally smoother. The stylus is also used for point-and-click adventure duties, such as handling puzzle pieces or scratching dust from an inscription, and certain situations will require the use of the microphone or both screens in concert.

*Another*'s presentation is attractive, with its island setting recalling *Ico*'s summer ruin and the isolationist head-scratching of *Myst*, but it's the strength of the puzzles – and how often they reinterpret pointing and clicking with touching, blowing and every other activity the DS can elicit – that could elevate it from quaint oddity to a wake-up call for a sleeping genre. Perhaps all the point-and-click adventure needs to stay relevant is to get out of the house more.







**Is it still product placement if it's your product being placed? Ashley's PDA, the DAS, has a familiar appearance – and the functionality's quite intuitive, too**



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **TRANJI**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q2 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E136, E140**

# Red Ninja: End Of Honour

## It's a black sheep, too – a ninja game where heart and soul aren't just for punching out of chests and hoovering up after battles

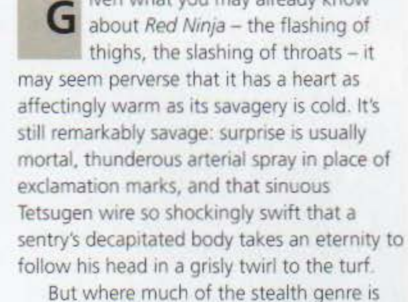


String up a soldier by his feet and he's an easy, if vocal, target. Caught unawares by the neck, they can be hanged silently if you keep the wire taut against their struggles. Any extended wire move risks Kurenai being toppled



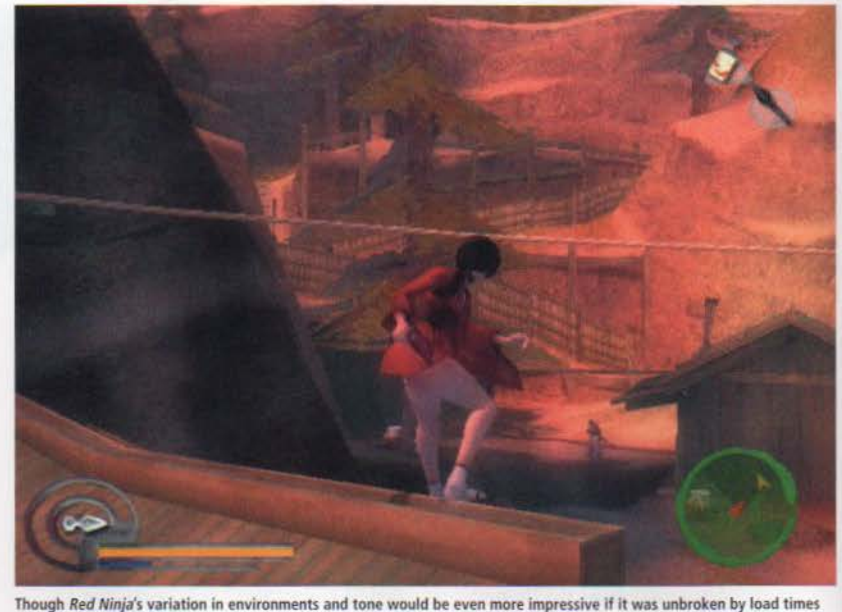
**Family business**

**The other members of Kurenai's adoptive clan appear for covert meetings during play, and these are well voiced and carefully animated – there's little sense of the Uncanny Valley in Kurenai and Zenso's interaction. It's a promising indication that if the storyline ends, as it began, in tears, there's a good chance you'll actually care what happens to the cast.**



Given what you may already know about *Red Ninja* – the flashing of thighs, the slashing of throats – it may seem perverse that it has a heart as affectingly warm as its savagery is cold. It's still remarkably savage: surprise is usually mortal, thunderous arterial spray in place of exclamation marks, and that sinuous Tetsugen wire so shockingly swift that a sentry's decapitated body takes an eternity to follow his head in a grisly twirl to the turf.

But where much of the stealth genre is cloaked in distant greys and matte wash, *Red Ninja* is suffused with autumnal colour, feeling alive instead of an immaculately presented still-life. Levels tell stories of distance and time, using their sectioned construction to constantly (and confidently) introduce new elements – weaving in and out of structures and environments on their own wiretrail, while peach and salmon sunrises deepen to the heavy blues of a building storm and the inevitable downpour.



Though *Red Ninja*'s variation in environments and tone would be even more impressive if it was unbroken by load times between sections, it still covers more ground in the course of a single level than some titles manage across several

And even with her murderous calling and the impropriety of a kimono that could win a *Dead Or Alive* pageant, Kurenai is a vital, expressive lead. She's framed expertly in the subtly directed in-game cut-scenes, if a little less so by the game camera's continued struggles to keep up with her at full pelt. Some areas sensibly pull back to a fixed angle for easier navigation, but in tight indoor confines the standard camera cramps Kurenai's style – seldom fatally, but enough to disconnect both you and her from that astonishing supernatural agility.



At almost every step there's a new talent to add to her impressive repertoire: swap the Tetsugen's blade for a weighted attachment and enemies can be tied to posts, strung from beams (though it's a little awkward to line up jumps to rafters at the best of times, never mind in combat) or dragged to their deaths safely out of earshot. That proves vital, for if it seems that the wire is in danger of pulling the whole game off balance, the foil for its power is the overwhelming numbers that respond to a shouted alarm.

As many as a dozen men-at-arms can join the hunt, with swordsmen encircling Kurenai on the ground or toppling her from ledges with thrown knives, while archers scan the rooftops from the back ranks. They're capable of putting up a determined sprint in pursuit, too, or alternately a flailing, desperate rout should you turn the tide in Kurenai's favour – the Tetsugen can cut through morale as ably as it does bodies.

The delay from *Red Ninja*'s original late-2004 release seems to be providing it, crucially, with the fine details to paint over all the ideas the developer had previously only sketched for it. The two hesitations in the confidence of its genre bending are the responsiveness of control and camera: if those continue to improve to the level of its other storytelling aspects, it will have been more than worth the wait.



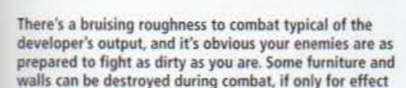
The weighted attachment doesn't share the blade's cutting power, nor can it directly damage a single target, but whirled around Kurenai's head it can hold off multiple attackers, briefly blinding any struck







Designated swinging points can be targeted even while freefalling, a requirement in several vertiginous climbing sections. Holding a shoulder button allows Kurenai to stop swinging and reposition for vertical movement


There's a bruising roughness to combat typical of the developer's output, and it's obvious your enemies are as prepared to fight as dirty as you are. Some furniture and walls can be destroyed during combat, if only for effect











# Shinobido Imashime

**With Tenchu in foreign hands and female ninjas getting their own games, the original ninja house is back to settle scores**

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SPIKE**
DEVELOPER: **ACQUIRE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E144**

As has been carefully explained in the introduction sequences of many Japanese titles over the generations – whoever said edutainment was dead? – the 16th century was an era of rival ninja clans. The 21st century, it seems, is an era of rival ninja game developers, as evidenced by *Tenchu* creator Acquire's latest project.

After losing the *Tenchu* rights to Activision (which would later compound the ill feeling by selling the outfit, and new *Tenchu* developer K2, to From), Acquire switched tack to the *Samuraido* (*Way Of The Samurai*) series, achieving mainland success but not the western appeal that *Tenchu* once enjoyed. It's a series of events that has led to *Shinobido*, the developer's return to the ninja scene – and the *Imashime* portion can be translated as 'Warning', directed pointedly at the pretenders to Acquire's genre.

This 'new-generation *Tenchu*' is to benefit from Acquire's experience with the *WOTS* series, promising both its freedom of action and nuance of sword combat. That freedom appears to manifest itself as non-linear level structure within missions, rather than the branching story elements of *WOTS* – a shame, considering the appeal of a complete ninja career simulator, but at least a confirmation of freeform skulking.

Skulking remains your primary activity, now abetted by wall-running and vertical hang moves to supplement the familiar access-all-areas grappling line: a rebuilt engine should hopefully follow the action with a more housebroken camera than that of previous *Tenchu* (and *WOTS*) titles. Though there will be ample opportunities to test the combat system in vicious duels, the enemy's group tactics, such as pinioning your character for a distant archer to deliver an ignoble execution, encourage the predatory play style that thirdperson hunters excel at.

*Shinobido* is a *Tenchu* fan's wishlist signed, sealed and delivered, right down to the inclusion of a map editor, and yet that description could be a criticism as much as a positive appraisal. In its single-mindedness to eclipse a six-year-old title, the danger is that Acquire may have failed to account for the advances in stealth and 3D movement elsewhere that have relegated the game to history. And while it would be unfair to say that *Shinobido* has a face only its daimyo could love, the rough edges and muddy palette unfortunately give the opposite impression of the developer's dedication to its project.

But it's experiencing the game in silent, deadly motion that will dispel or confirm these doubts. The intent to beat *Tenchu*, not repeat it, is a chance to shed the genre's accumulated baggage for an altogether more streamlined experience. That's a prospect that both dedicated fans and those who wished the series had died an honourable death a generation ago should find interesting.


The segmented environments offer huge possibilities for movement, at the cost of feeling like angular videogame levels – hopefully motion will give them an organic spark



**Travelling ninjas**

**Publisher Spike has announced that *Shinobido* will also be released on PSP, and it's likely that connectivity options will at the very least allow for maps created on the PS2 version to be played on both. It's the PSP that will be centre stage for Acquire and K2's ninja conflict, too, as the latter's current project is a PSP *Tenchu* for From Software. The claws are out.**


Close combat will feature both sword attacks and martial arts, whereas ranged combat allows for instant-kill shuriken throws if performed accurately


Acquire's character design is well-regarded, so it's a shame only two characters have been revealed so far: the protagonist Go and a female ninja. Their relationship appears somewhat volatile

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEJ**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2005**

# Bleach

## PSP's inaugural 3D fighter makes getting Bleach on your hands relatively painless





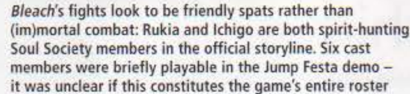
Each character's story mode features dialogue sections fully voiced by the animated series' actors, a coup for the game's fan appeal. No details of play modes beyond story and quick match were apparent, but it's still early days

A measure of current manga sensation Bleach's popularity is that even the usually stoic Sony has pounced on the licence – one of the rare occasions that it has muscled in on a bidding war for an animated franchise (another being the more style-fitting Ghost In The Shell).

The tale of a high-school student balancing the trials of adolescent life with moonlighting as a sword-wielding hunter of restless spirits, Bleach is naturally suited to an action game rewrite. But only the PS2 version is taking that direct approach, with the PSP's game instead appearing as a 3D fighter. The early version on show at December's Jump Festa was a promising indication of the PSP's 3D fighting chops, although the gameplay was obviously oriented towards more casual, less arcade-stick-hardened fingertips.

Most actions are one-button based and combos are simple to perform, with face buttons for attacks, jumps and character-specific special moves, and a stylish orbiting dash/dodge on the left shoulder button. It's possible the fighting system may have deeper layers yet to be implemented – the gauge at the top of the screen was left unexplained, for instance – but more likely *Bleach* is intended for an audience chiefly interested in whether their favourite cast member can take on allcomers, not flexing their tournament-hustling skills.






*Bleach's* fights look to be friendly spats rather than (im)mortal combat: Rukia and Ichigo are both spirit-hunting Soul Society members in the official storyline. Six cast members were briefly playable in the Jump Festa demo – it was unclear if this constitutes the game's entire roster

However, it's a smooth-playing, attractive title even in its unfinished state, suggesting the completed article could prove more than a novelty interest for a western audience unexposed (and possibly immune) to *Bleach* fever. If nothing else, the slickness of its production may catch the attention of other beat 'em up developers – as evidenced by the tantalising inclusion of *Rival Schools* in a recent Capcom audience survey for future PSP development.

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138**

# Forza Motorsport

## Powering stubbornly towards an uncertain destination, Microsoft's budding Gran Turismo killer seems to be losing its grip on reality




*Forza* sports 230 cars from more than 40 manufacturers, all of which can be tweaked and upgraded by players

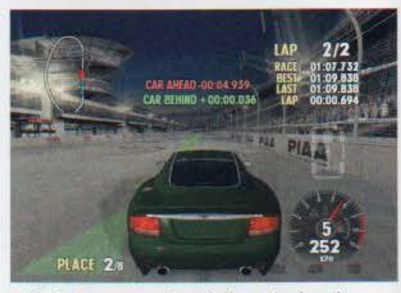
There are few extremities of character to rival Jeremy Clarkson as he commands a powerful motor car. He guns the growling engine, wind battling through his curly mop as he nestles the highway code between his backside and the real leather upholstery. His hand maintains an iron grip on the gears in case, if the worst happens, he has to break his diatribe to camera and drop below the proverbial top gear. But suddenly he blinks and the car is gone, supplanted by a vibrating wheel and a widescreen depiction of a dreary Silverstone. The enthusiasm wanes and Clarkson curls his lips round a word starting with 'F'. Only this word has five letters.




The lingering issue with *Forza Motorsport* is that, unlike an *F355 Challenge* or *Gran Turismo*, it offers no consolation for falling short of reality. The hook, apparently, is that technical accomplishment will surpass such requirements. That lofty ambition, though, has pushed the bar beyond what Team Forza and, frankly, the Xbox seem able to achieve. Rather than funding something excitingly real, the overtly technical approach hampers the visual package and, at 30fps, the much-needed sense of precision. This month's *GTR* proves, to a degree, that brutally accurate racing can be a surprisingly inclusive experience when interpreted correctly; *Forza*, in comparison, looks to entice few beyond the undemanding enthusiast.

This isn't to say that the final build won't still find an audience. Handling purists will find cheer in the internally accurate scores of breakable, pedantically modeled cars. Online play promises to surpass that of *Project Gotham 2* with car clubs and an elaborate career mode. Somewhere, in the zone of auto-fetish and beneath-the-hood minutiae, *Forza* will likely find at least part of the committed audience it's yearning for.




Tracks in *Forza* are mathematically precise, boasting geography that is supremely authentic. Sadly, hardware limitations seem to have collided with the ambition




# Champions: Return To Arms

**Champions' return is good news for dungeon crawlers, but bad news for barrels and crates throughout the Planes of Power**

Last year's *Champions Of Norrath* was an enjoyably beefy arcade RPG, but one with unsightly flaws in its otherwise flashy armour, including an unreliable online mode that felt very much like the hasty addition that it had been, and an overloaded dual-layer DVD format prone to read errors on all but the most industrial-laser-strength PS2 drives.

*Return To Arms* addresses both those issues in its efforts to coax *Champions'* champions out of retirement, along with several tweaks to the game itself (but none severe enough to overcomplicate the soothingly rhythmic hacking and slashing). As before, up to four players can adventure cooperatively, importing their characters from *Champions* or starting afresh. Those who sneer at cooperation are able to duel other players in a separate play mode, an inclusion no doubt at the behest of the bloodsport-hungry online crowd.

The storyline, slight as it may be, can now be experienced from either good or evil's perspective, depending on your reaction to an overt recruitment drive from evil in the first level. Perhaps as a warning that there are no free lunches on the dark side, the first evil-path boss fight is astronomically tough, although the virtuous fare only slightly better – one aspect that doesn't appear to have changed is Snowblind's misjudgement of boss difficulty.

Either alignment involves a tour of *EverQuest's* various planes of existence, with occasional stops on the mainland of Norrath, and finds *Champions'* still-crisp tilesets reused alongside some new designs. Both old and new visuals benefit from hand-arranged levels in place of the original's random generation, offsetting the loss of replay novelty with more characterful locations and encounter pacing. After completing each story section it's possible to revisit the area and attempt a medal challenge, ranging from impromptu boss duels to timed sections: success unlocks an extra dungeon to plumb for items. Naturally, *RTA* features an army's worth of new equipment, and item drops are now more sensibly skewed to character levels, a welcome change after *Champions'* tendency to saddle starting players with 20th-level equipment and veterans with leather sandals.

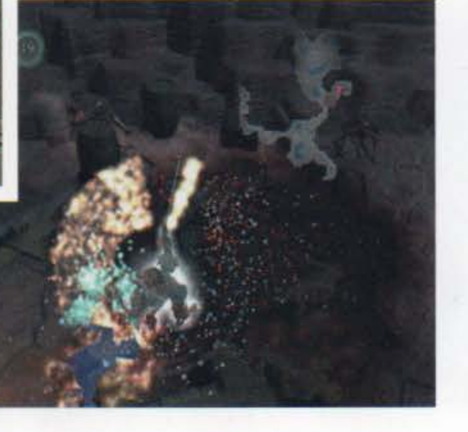
While early enemies are still grist for windmilling swords, stronger foes use guard-breaking and knockdown moves with enough regularity to reduce the effectiveness of single-button strategies. It's in the chaos of ambushes or assaults on entrenched positions that *RTA's* combat is at its best, but there are still lengthy point-and-slay lulls when enemies have neither the numbers nor aggression to survive beyond appearing on screen.

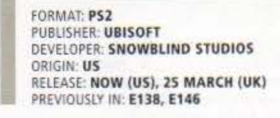
But *Champions* was never really concerned with any depth of battle strategy beyond CHARGE or RUN, and sweeping through battlefields on a tide of slain enemies and incompatible items can still provide an uncomplicated, empowering evening's play. These may be arms with a little less lustre the second time around, but it's still a welcome return.



**The lazy afternoon sunlight of the Plane Of Innovation's scrapyards (top) is an attractive early indication of the new artwork, but careful level design rescues the old tilesets from feeling particularly bland in comparison**

**As well as new weapon artwork, each character class receives a new ultimate set of armour. The female characters', naturally, follow the high fantasy rule of showing an amount of skin inversely proportional to their protective value**





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **SNOWBLIND STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOW (US), 25 MARCH (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E146**



## Run the gauntlet

**An alternate Arena play mode strips back the pesky RPG elements for a last-man-standing brawl against waves of enemies, with just enough time to assign your accelerated level-up points before the next crashes in. It's fast and fun, although enemies rapidly become too difficult to handle solo; the player-vs-player option is also a little arbitrary, given *RTA's* combat mechanics.**



**Every section seems to bring a new objective, although they're all neccessarily variations on a theme of locate and destroy. It remains to be seen how divergently the alignment paths will play out, or whether it's just a case of switching who needs killing or rescuing**



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 25**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E143**



# Devil May Cry 3

## It's third time plucky for a younger, fresher Dante, as the devil makes even more play for idle hands

Devil May Cry 2 wasn't bad, of course, it was just misdirected. And deliberately so, with producer Tsuyoshi Tanaka hoping to find a wider audience for Dante's mesmerising rock-opera of sword swipes, unlimited-ammo gunplay and explosive acrobatics. You can draw your own conclusions as to its success in that regard – *Devil May Cry 3* isn't just a return to the twitchy challenge and fiery entertainment of the first game, but a return of a different kind, re-running Dante's salad days as a demon hunter.

It's as fine a reason as any for the franchise to head into camp Carry On Combat territory: surfing on prone enemy bodies, spinning around a showgirl's pole in a beautiful nightclub, fights of the kind of speed and intensity that make *Prince Of Persia*'s recent sequel seem rendered entirely in sandy slow-mo. The tremendous CGI sequences don't just show off some impressive direction and rendering, but also just how close to the cheesy bone Dante's dialogue is willing to shave. But it's all in the name of slick, unabashed fun, of a fighting system so vigorous, flamboyant and smooth that it can remain completely empowering despite the lack of true camera control.

Weapon switching allows the player to cycle through their equipped blades and guns instantly, even mid-combo, making for some staggering shows of juggling and sharpshooting. Of Dante's styles (which take a significant investment of time to upgrade), Gunslinger is the most instantly rewarding, allowing Dante to throw down a whirling rainstorm of bullets from the air or – with a shotgun – snap shots off in every direction at once in a blazing display known as Fireworks. Sword Master and Trickster are the most obvious in practice, blessing Dante with increased blade and dodge/wall run skills respectively. It's Royal Guard, however, that feels like a true departure, giving Dante a block and – with timing – the power to reverse the energy of enemy attacks back at them. It's this that will provide the freshest edge of combat for seasoned devil criers, but just how it'll hold up the inferno of the more intense battles is yet to be seen.

The game opens with a handful of supremely short and focused missions, set in small areas, that allow players to ease themselves into Dante's spectacularly energetic groove before being given the freedom to roam and explore more expansive environs. And it also opens with a sense of indelible freshness, of a game given the kind of sizzling and uninhibited rebirth that the franchise has been deserving of since its inception some four years ago. Even if it doesn't expand the fan base, it's certainly looking to enrich it.



### Dante stop me now

**Dante's performance is rated by a typical combo system of exam grades, ranging from D to S, but involves more than just chaining hits together in a short space of time. It's all about style through skill, requiring a variety of attacks and techniques to be linked together; repeating yourself with the same combat sequence over and over will cause your rating to plummet, meaning that the replay of past missions – at any point in the game – and getting cosy with weapon-swapping is essential for a healthy Devil Hunter rank. Statues (like the one shown above) hold several flames, which can be extinguished through the application of certain skills, in return for a reward.**





**There's some camera control handed to the player during certain sections of the game, but it's not as welcome as you may think. Being used to having the game itself direct the camera angles with you as the star, it's easy to forget that the option is even there at all**



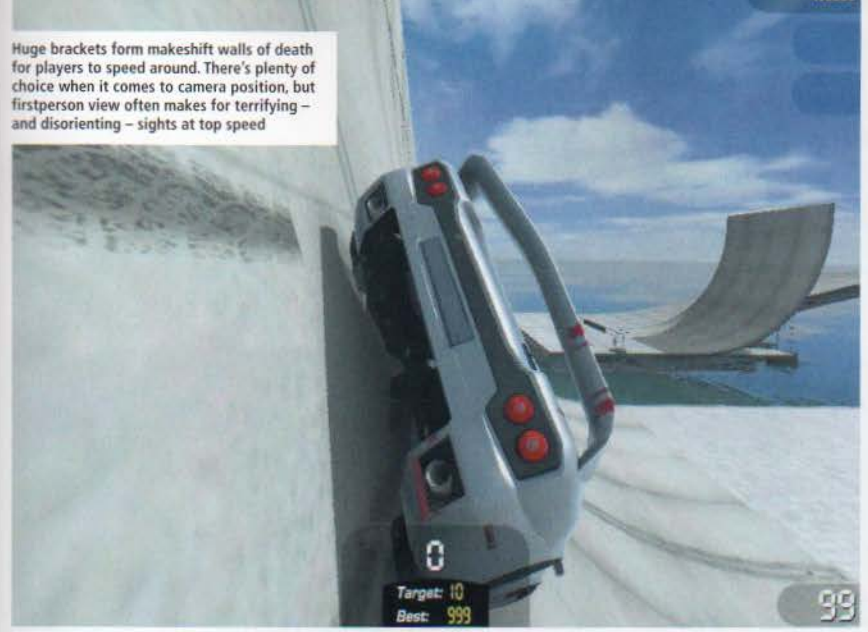
**Surprisingly early in the game, Dante is handed another melee weapon – a set of flails. A reliably showy videogame device, they turn the protagonist's already-nimble attacks into an even livelier whirl of icy somersaults and bone-cracking lashes**





**The first boss will potentially, in true *Devil May Cry* style, be a harsh rite of passage for newcomers. Dying three times will result in the player being given the option of taking Capcom's standard, and very nearly insulting, severance cheque: the Easy difficulty setting**





Huge brackets form makeshift walls of death for players to speed around. There's plenty of choice when it comes to camera position, but firstperson view often makes for terrifying – and disorienting – sights at top speed







# Trackmania: Sunrise

## Stimulation, not simulation, as a whole new day dawns on Nadeo's pseudo-Scalectrix

For a game that defiantly refused to get involved in the continual (and sometimes jading) technical envelope-pushing of PC gaming, it's maybe a little troubling to see that *Trackmania's* welcome follow-up looks a whole generation ahead of the original. Gone are the dinky Matchbox cars, and in their places are what look like vehicles, not toys: racing machines with the weight and detail of a more down-to-earth driving game. The simplistic, narrow tracks have been fattened into something far wider, and environments appear more complex and busy with peripheral detail. Indeed, the opening pan as the camera slides across the sun-blessed first-race challenge level wouldn't feel out of place in *Project Gotham Racing 2*.

But, actually, there's little cause for concern. If PC games really are just flashier refinements of the same old genres, then *Trackmania: Sunrise* is definitely a PC game. It still retains the elegant digital control system – played with the arrow keys, or a pad – but manages to give its vehicles a surprising sensation of heft and acceleration without any compromise. And the tracks, despite the makeover, appear to retain their outrageous nature, feeling like automotive fairground rides with the safety barriers removed. The roads snake, twist and buckle, offering turbo boosts and right-angled bends, and that extra width and scale on offer is as welcome as the increased sense of contact with terra firma.

A cutaway camera accompanies massive jumps, but doesn't intrude any. Turbo-boost chevrons are often in place to give players a last-minute shove when approaching some particularly cavernous leaps

Along with the original *Trackmania's* race and puzzle modes, *Sunrise* takes the game into its natural direction of progression: platform mode. This points the game into *Super Monkey Ball* territory, requiring the completion of a dizzying assault course with as few track resets as possible. It's an excellent idea, but does seem limited at this early stage by the lack of ability to twist and angle your car in mid-air. It's not as if realism is anywhere on the agenda, and you can brake or accelerate while not in contact with the ground, so why not a *Burnout 3*-style aftertouch capability? Numerous sections of the platform mode require your car to leave a flat, inverted ramp while upside down, and somehow not end up stranded on its roof – mid-air control of the vehicle would solve this, and really open up the possibilities for creative stunt play.

Otherwise, though, it's hard to fault *Sunrise*, even at this early stage, as it seems right on course to keep *Trackmania's* accessible, addictive philosophy of speedy, haphazard, larger-than-life driving fun precisely on track.



There's a far greater sense of scale, thanks as much to the generous width of the roads as the increase in visual scope. The titular sunrise itself, along with the pleasant water effects, is a fetching sight compared to the lo-fi appeal of the original

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **DIGITAL JESTERS**
DEVELOPER: **NADEO**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 4**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E139**



### Santa's workshop

A strong feature of the original was its track editor mode, a boon considering the hobby-kit nature of the courses. *Sunrise's* editor is similarly flexible, with extra course pieces available for unlocking with points earned from besting challenges. As a multiplayer experience, a smooth racing encounter is promised for those on 56K connections, with competitors' cars passing through one another to avoid the prospect of collisions. A pool of uploaded user-made courses gave the original *Trackmania* appealing longevity for enthusiastic sharers, and we see no reason for *Sunrise* not to engender the same sense of community.





Indoor gymnastic sessions are deliberate and delicious for it, though their limited sequences may not bear up to repetition



FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **HIP INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **BLUE52**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E139, E140**

# Stolen

## Safes are light work, but Stolen may not be able to crack the matter of convincingly tying all its elements together



*Stolen* handles corner-hugging with considerable grace: a buttonpress slides Anya around the edge without breaking cover, and in narrow hallways it's possible to launch from a wall-press to one on the other side in a single action



While guards aren't particularly resourceful or determined in their searches, you'll learn to fear the sweep of their flashlights. Even when not actively searching for Anya, a guard may idly flick a beam down the corridor, prompting an urgent duck-and-roll to safety

As any fan of heist movies knows, the best-laid plans and the actual execution are worlds apart. Unfortunately, that's an aspect that the preview build of *Stolen* demonstrates too well. The game's hook – to instil a sense of motion and urgency into a genre choked by inaction – is as alluring as when we first saw it six months ago, but so too is the sensation that more time and focus is needed to deliver on it.

Perhaps the biggest issue is that *Stolen* only wants to let you be an athlete when the game dictates it. Physical puzzle sections call for heroine Anya to leap, vault and spring like an Olympic performer, but in areas not specifically traced out with context-sensitive triggers she's as landlocked as any Snake. Important traverse points are marked with a reassuring glow, but this only serves to heighten the disappointment that so much of each area's structure is out of bounds.

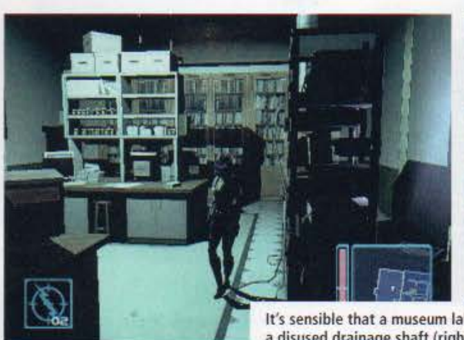
It's never more noticeable than when fleeing alerted guards: the fantasy is to bound up a wall and leap for the rafters, but the reality is usually an ungainly scrabble against a defiantly unclimbable surface. Dishearteningly, it turns a game that wasn't supposed to be about hiding in shadows and waiting for guards to pass into exactly that, with confrontations often too fatally clumsy to recover from.

At this stage of development, it may be too late to reconcile *Stolen*'s split personality, other than in the occasional sections in which Anya can highwire-walk above guards napping at their security desks or make leaps of faith between prison walkways rather than face questing torch beams. As a stealth game alone the overfamiliarity drowns out the unique touches; as a contortionist platformer alone the context sensitivity gives the benefit of strict, *Shenmue* QTE-like definition, but at the cost of improvisation.

Even so, *Stolen* isn't an entirely lost cause, just one suffering from misplaced purpose. Its imagery remains striking, those blindingly bright or wanly muted sodium hues render a pulp graphic novel world without resorting to cel-shading. Each level's entry periods are well-paced, teasingly swelling and fading tension from room to room. And the premise alone – in a genre dominated by Boy's Own gunslingers (*Thief*'s steampunk profiteering aside) – is still more endearing than breaking and entering with murder in mind.

It's a plan that could still come together in that last-minute second wind equally beloved of heist movies. If *Stolen* might not quite pull off an Ocean's Eleven, there are good ideas here that deserve better than to end in a self-destructive Tarantino bloodbath.







It's sensible that a museum lab room (left) should offer fewer acrobatic triggers than a disused drainage shaft (right), but a little more artistic licence would be welcome





# Time trials

**The PC firstperson shooter field is a fiercely competitive one. This ambitious new entry has time, at least, on its side...**

Normal mapping, detailed normal mapping, parallax mapping, cube mapping, dynamic lighting, ambient occlusion lighting, spherical harmonics, high definition rendering (HDR), dynamic shadows, realistic physics, realshatter technology (allowing for realtime destruction of objects under the control of the physics engine) and more besides – Saber Interactive's Saber3d engine, developed cooperatively between its facilities in New York and New Jersey, has everything you'd expect from a contemporary piece of rendering technology, and probably more besides. But then it needs such things. It is, after all, powering a new PC firstperson shooter headed for a world that has being playing a certain game called *Half-Life 2*. So this particular FPS has something else built into its foundations, too. The clue is in the game's name: *TimeShift*.

"The time-manipulation mechanic is the feature around which the entire game is built," explains **Matthew Karch**, Sabre's CEO. "By slowing, stopping or reversing time the player has the ability to – among other things – freeze and reverse AI states, to reverse falling objects upwards and ride on them like elevators, to slow the speed of incoming projectiles of superior opponents and to generally alter the laws of physics through proper manipulation of the time powers." This isn't a technology issue but a design one, then. "It influences every aspect of design from level creation to AI programming to weapon and opponent design," says Karch.





Manipulating time (using power from your suit, which must be recharged) brings about some interesting visual effects (left). An enemy watches over the train hangar which you must infiltrate via less-than-immediately-obvious means (below)





You probably haven't heard of Sabre Interactive. The company has only produced a couple of titles, the most recent being 2003's *Will Rock*, a firstperson shooter in the *Serious Sam* mould. It wasn't an especially ambitious title. *TimeShift* seems a grander undertaking all round. But then it has to be. Back to *Half-Life 2*...

"Advances in graphics technology and the advent of realistic physics have really raised expectations among gamers and made it much harder to create a game that will impress and amuse consumers," acknowledges Karch. "In spite of these advances, though, I always felt that it was the original *Half-Life* that set the standard. I'm not saying in any way that *HL2* is not a great game, but rather that every game in the genre since the original *HL* has been evolutionary and not revolutionary – including the recent slew of hit shooters. We like to think of *TimeShift* not as a pure shooter but rather as an action game that requires time manipulation and FPS skills to complete the game. In this way, we kind of fit into the whole evolutionary scheme by adding another dimension to FPS gameplay. In fact, *HL2* is a good analogy to our title because of the way in which they employed physics... [It] forced gamers to understand the way in which the physics in the game worked and to utilise that knowledge to pass certain obstacles in the game. In *TimeShift*, the game is designed around the idea of time manipulation. The player has to really have a firm grasp of the time powers and the way in which they interact with the game world in order to complete the game's challenges. This new dimension of time control is what really sets the game apart."

**"The player has to really have a firm grasp of the time powers and the way in which they interact with the game world to complete the challenges"**

**A demonstration shows** exactly what he's talking about. We approach a hangar-like structure and its enormous doorway opens to reveal a train, which rolls out and away along a track. Ignoring it as it moves off, we venture inside. Walking along the track in the shadows we can see that we need to get up on the platform. We can't reach it via jumping, so the search begins for some steps. There are none. We're stumped. Atari's PR manager takes over, and manoeuvres outside again, then climbs a metallic stairway that leads to the hangar's roof. He walks out to a platform which sits over the hangar's doorway and positions himself above the train track. Then the fun starts: he kicks in the time-reverse power, the outer areas of the screen ooze shafts of pulsating colours, and the train snakes backwards and towards the hangar again. When it's directly below, *TimeShift*'s hero is able to jump on to a carriage and ride it back inside, whereupon he's now able to reach the platform. Problem solved.

So that's reversing time. Simply slowing down time has its own benefits (especially when you come up against groups of enemies equipped with high-velocity weaponry – but we're promised there are other uses, too), and then there's freezing time. Karch paints a picture of a half-frozen stretch of water you'll encounter at some point in the game: "The pond is

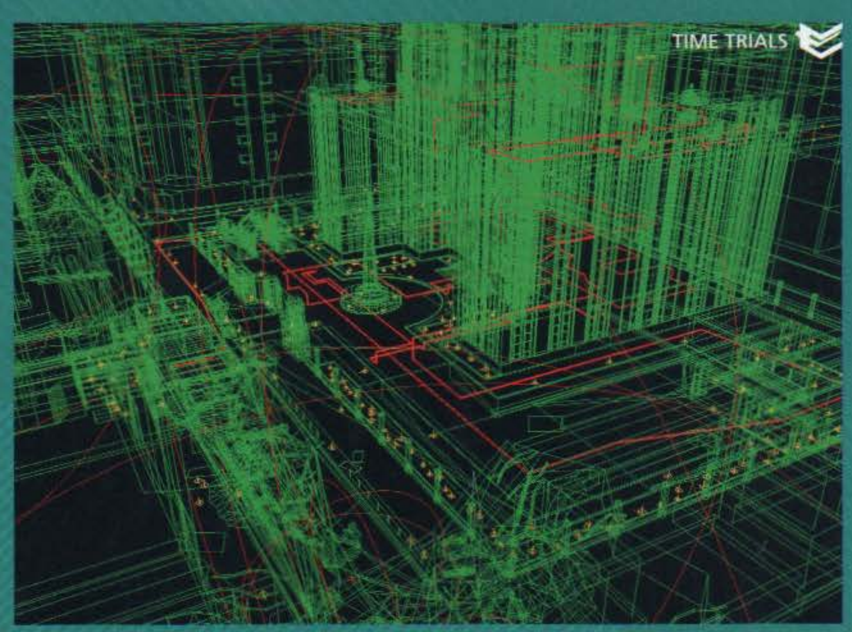








Like just about every weapon in the game, your standard pistol has both main and secondary fire modes. Unlike just about every weapon in the game, though, it has spikes which can be used when bludgeoning



As well as natural environments, *TimeShift* will also feature skyscrapers, subways, factories and other structures, delivered by Sabre's proprietary 3D technology, which "feature-wise, is comparable to leading off-the-shelf solutions" used in FPSes

littered with ice floes that rest on the surface. You need to find a way across, but the only apparent path is straight through it. If you fall into the icy water you'll likely perish. You can try to jump on the ice floes but as you do so your weight causes them to sink, so you'll fall in. What should you do? You activate your time-suspend power. During time-suspend everything is frozen in time and space as if it were rock-solid; only the player's motion is unaffected by the power. As you activate the power all of the ice floes become frozen solid and unaffected by your weight, so you can jump from one floe to the next and quickly make your way across."

If you were to sit with a notepad and begin to put some thought into how the three time-control mechanics could be put to use in a 3D game environment, before long you'd come up with scenarios with genuine puzzle potential. This is FPS game design unlike the usual get-from-A-to-B-and-be-sure-to-kill-whatever-gets-in-your-way. "We've created dozens and dozens of tricky challenges and battle scenes that require mastery of the time powers," says Karch. "One of the coolest aspects of the time manipulation mechanic is that it allows the player to move through the game world in ways unforeseen by the designers. Our testing has shown that gamers will often use the powers in unpredictable ways. It really allows for a great degree of emergent gameplay and provides added depth."

**There is sophistication** at work in both the graphics technology and approach to certain game design elements in *TimeShift*. All told, however, it is not a subtle beast. Your basic pistol weapon, for example, is studded with spikes, allowing you to also use it up close as a vicious stabbing tool. Your enemies do not crumple and expire when shot but (if you've pounded them with ammo from a powerful enough weapon, at least) explode into bloody pieces which cascade on to the ground like slabs of kebab meat. Look, too, at the weapon you hold in your hands as you unleash hell: is that enemy blood spattering all over its shiny surfaces, making it progressively redder? Yes, it is.

## You have to see the rocket launcher's secondary-fire mode in action in order to appreciate just how over-the-top videogame firearms can be

There's something of *Mortal Kombat*'s coppery flavour to *TimeShift*, mixed in with a feel not entirely removed from the *Unreal* series, plus a helping of later *Turok*s in the larger-than-life weaponry on display (you really have to see the heat-seeking rocket launcher's secondary-fire mode in action in order to appreciate just how amusingly over-the-top videogame firearms can be). We ask Karch about the game's bold look. He doesn't seem to think it's particularly outrageous. "Most of our sources of inspiration for the game have come from science fiction works by authors such as HG Wells, Jules Verne and Robert Heinlein," he explains. "The idea behind the game is rooted in steampunk."

This is reflected in what we've seen of the game's architecture, but *TimeShift* has a softer side, too, reflected by its verdant exteriors with their variety of trees and swaying grasses. We're not shown many locations during our demo, but Karch gets almost poetic when he promises that the finished game will offer "a wide range of both indoor and outdoor environments. The player will visit city streets, subways and skyscrapers; he'll ride vehicles through canyons and mountains in temperate valleys and frigid, snow-covered mountain passes; he'll infiltrate enemy bases and factories, and he'll travel back in time to places of our past."

Getting to explore these places is still some way off in the future, though. Karch and his team haven't yet even decided how they're going to handle health power-ups, for example. "If at all possible we'd like to avoid the placement of medikits or health 'refilling' stations," he says. "Unless we can think of a clever way to logically include health items, we'll most likely avoid them altogether." There's a lot of development time left, then. And time is of the essence.



"In terms of AI our gameplay is heavily influenced by *Call Of Duty*," says Karch. "We love the way the AI in *COD* seems so natural and logical." In terms of pacing, meanwhile, *Halo* is cited as a key inspiration

### Three wheels good



If there was one thing familiar about the *TimeShift* demo it was that, time control or not, you still negotiated the gameworld in a traditional FPS manner – ie, on your own two feet. Possibly in a nod towards *Half-Life 2*, though, Karch reveals that: "The player will be able to ride on or actually commandeer certain vehicles in the game. Like all other aspects of the game, vehicle gameplay is also designed around the time-control mechanic. All of our vehicles are really unique in design and unlike anything gamers have encountered before. It adds another dimension..."

The three-wheeled motorcycle pictured above will certainly be a first for an FPS. We wonder whether controlling such vehicles will be as straightforward as it was in *Half-Life 2*...

TITLE: **TIMESHIFT**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **SABER INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **Q4 2005**



# TOY SOLDIERS

Pivotal Games' Conflict series has become a successful war franchise without resorting to exploitation, representing the art of war as more than just morbid spectacle. We join the Bath-based developer to look both back and forward at Conflicts past and future, and find out if anything is about to change



Gamers should surely be getting fed up of wargames, as wearied as jaded veterans conscripted onto the battlefield by a never-ending stream of publisher-friendly campaigns. But the *Conflict* series has never been a bandwagon jumper: its use of the term 'wargame' is literal, not simply shorthand for movie-wannabe glamour and poorly scripted chaos. Rather than trying to replicate *Medal Of Honor*'s plastic, romanticised scenarios or the gobby melodrama of *Full Spectrum Warrior*'s dialogue, the *Conflict* games have used the props of war to provide solid, slick, large-scale strategy. They're more of a tabletop boardgame writ large, with the player following through their own decisions with the level of control and intimacy that only a videogame can provide. Its matter-of-fact mission briefings and unpretentious approach make it feel like one of the least gung-ho series around, and all the more absorbing for it. *Conflict: Global Terror* is Pivotal's fourth *Conflict* game, and sees your four-man squad flitting around the world to counter a seemingly diffuse set of terrorist cells. More importantly, it looks like an updated return to the form of the *Desert Storm* games.



Pivotal MD Jim Bambra (above) and Alex McLean, director of technology

The increased detail takes this latest *Conflict* title away from the relatively lo-fi look of the *Desert Storm* games, and into the territory of *Rainbow Six*

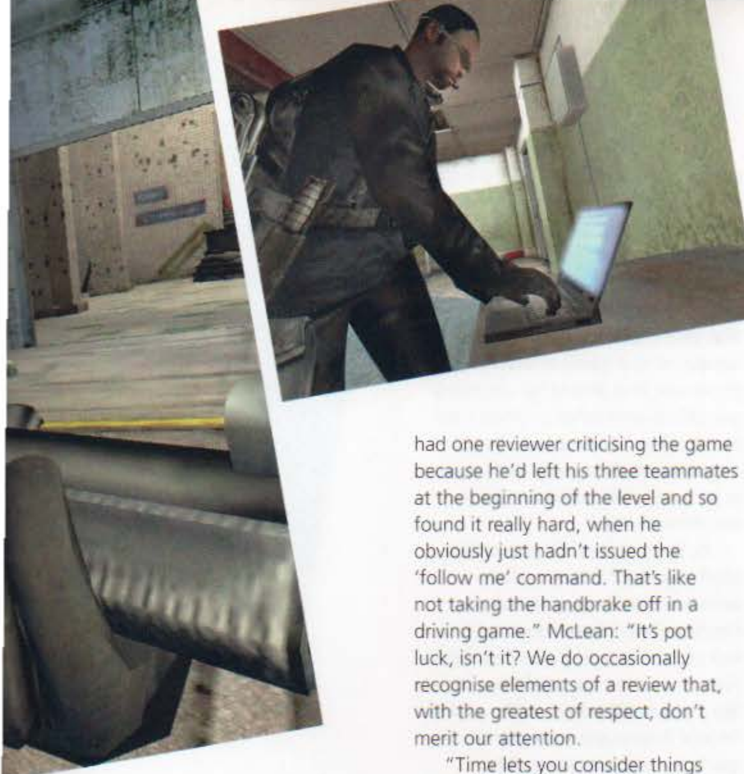
With enemies posing a greater threat, it's unclear whether the *Conflict* save system – two per level, used at the player's wish – will have to change

Before anything else, though, a flashback. *Conflict: Vietnam*, the third and most recently released game, was the first to receive some truly harsh and noticeable criticism at review stage. "*Conflict: Vietnam* was different from the others," says **Jim Bambra**, managing director of Pivotal Games. "Because of the nature of the war, we went for a more claustrophobic feel. There were missions where the player was cut off, and every VC in a two-mile radius was creeping up on them. Some of the complaints we received regarded the player being attacked from an area that they'd already cleared. Realistically, your helicopter had gone down, the VCs were closing in, and the idea was to use this to push you forward. Some people didn't like that. They wanted all their enemies up in front. But our attitude is that this is a squad-based game, and so you can afford to have one guy hang back and cover the group. If you played it like that, then it wasn't a problem. The *Desert Storm* games were set in the open and people liked that wide, expansive stuff. It's this claustrophobia that has caused the adverse reactions among the press. We found that it was those who played *Conflict: Desert Storm I* and *II* that had the most problems; if *Vietnam* was their first, they didn't miss that freedom."

The problems were claimed to go deeper than just fear of change, though. As we said in our 5/10 review of *Conflict: Vietnam*: 'While your soldiers follow orders quickly and efficiently, they seem unable to take down any enemy in the middle distance without spending an entire clip… they seem unable to fortify any position singlehandedly.'

"CONFLICT: VIETNAM WAS DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS. WE WENT FOR A MORE CLAUSTROPHOBIC FEEL"

Clarification is offered by **Alex McLean**, Pivotal's director of technology: "We found that what used to happen quite often is that you'd leave a soldier to cover an area, and they would hear something that would cause them to turn the other way." Continues Bambra: "I think with *Vietnam*, until your guys upgraded to a certain level of experience, they weren't that useful and cool under fire. They would just



tend to spray the undergrowth, which again was a Vietnam phenomenon. Once they were better, they wouldn't waste anything."

"Regarding the *Vietnam* reviews," says McLean, "we obviously don't like those that don't rate the game. We kill ourselves to make our games, we work an average of 60 hours a week all the time. No one's bitter about it, but what we do is take it on the chin, rack up all the criticisms that we consider to be credible, those that occur consistently across platforms and across reviewers, and put them right at the top of our list, even if it goes against the way things we've done in the past."

Bambra: "A couple of reviewers have stated that they just didn't like the Vietnam war, and so want nothing to do with it. We even had one reviewer criticising the game because he'd left his three teammates at the beginning of the level and so found it really hard, when he obviously just hadn't issued the 'follow me' command. That's like not taking the handbrake off in a driving game." McLean: "It's pot luck, isn't it? We do occasionally recognise elements of a review that, with the greatest of respect, don't merit our attention.

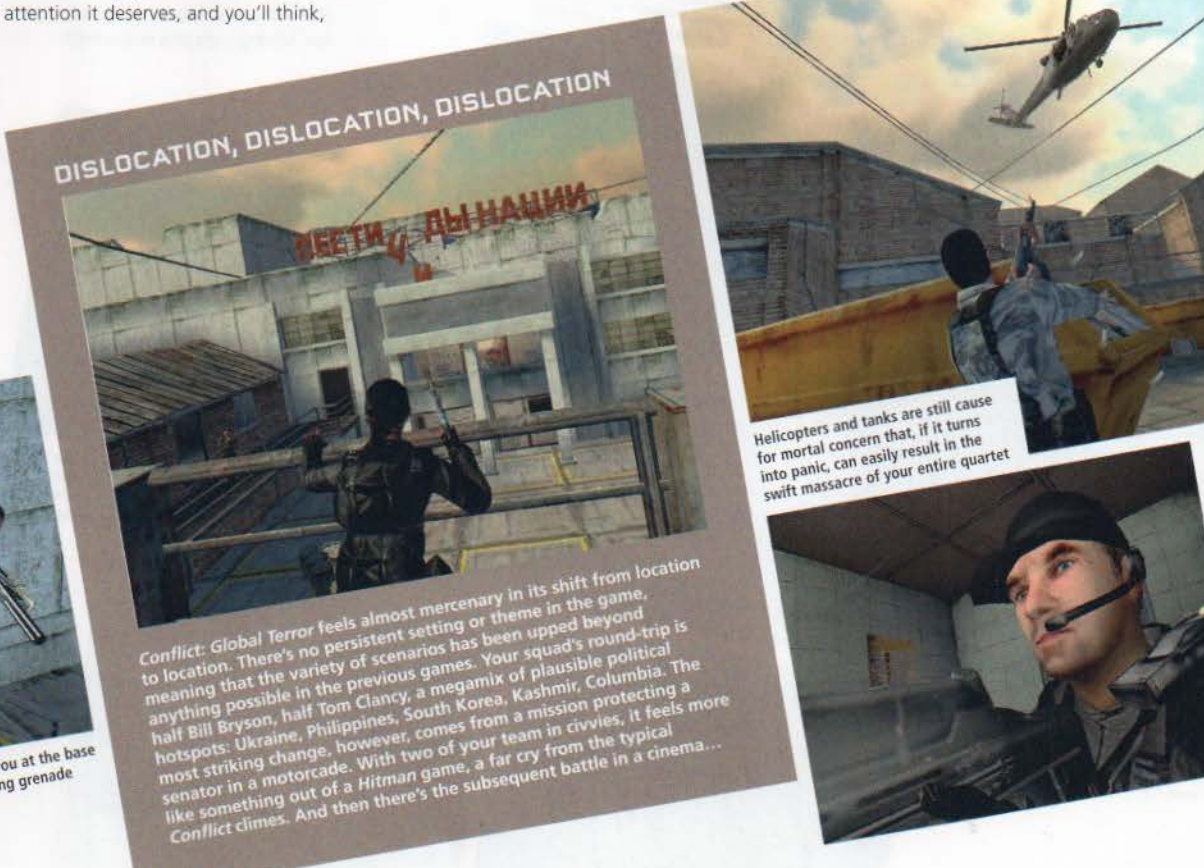
"Time lets you consider things more objectively, too. When we've just finished a game is not the time to ask us what we think of reviews and reviewers – we'll fucking kill them! We're so angry because we've not seen our family or friends for so long. Someone makes a flippant comment towards the game, and you're only human – you can't consider it objectively. But, given time, two or three months, give the criticism the attention it deserves, and you'll think, 'Ah, they're bloody right'. And that's what we've done with *Conflict: Global Terror* – we've made a hit list of all the things we've recognised as failings."

**One mission in** *Global Terror* sees your team performing an information-gathering operation in a sarin gas plant in South Korea. It's obvious – and necessary – within seconds that the *Conflict* squad is back into its tight, professional groove. Laser sights flicker across the exterior of the building as your team tracks targets and neutralises them, while you take a single soldier up slightly ahead to fortify another vital area, giving your whole team breathing space to push on. It's tangible teamwork, the highlight of the *Desert Storm* games, except refined and more intense. This gas factory blitz doesn't just reinforce an old feeling, but also creates a new sensation: height. The complex itself feels like a truly 3D location, with sets of stairs, mezzanine floors, walkways, ladders and plenty of furniture. Crossfires and vantage points will need to take on a whole new dimension in order to cope with all manner of angles of threat.

"One of the biggest improvements in *Global Terror*," says McLean, "has been the AI, predominantly for enemies but also for your team – stopping them from behaving in a daft way, and in a way that was expected." And enemy troops aren't hesitant about making a show of their new-found brainpower, to the point of using radial cover behind trees and pillars to evade the player. The exaggerated auto-aiming function of old – where your character would flick their aim to an onscreen enemy within a generous range – has gone. The continual stream of spawning enemies at certain points ("The conga of death" says Bambra), which turned the game into a straightforward duckshoot at certain points, has been curtailed somewhat. Enemies can now memorise threatening hotspots, becoming aware of certain chokepoints where their allies have been mown down, and attempt to find alternate routes. Still, that doesn't mean they can't be pressured into taking a pratfall; landing a grenade near an enemy will cause them to vault over nearby rails and banisters,

If the enemy spots your team in a cluster – or detects you at the base of a stairwell – be ready to scatter ahead of an incoming grenade

## DISLOCATION, DISLOCATION, DISLOCATION



*Conflict: Global Terror* feels almost mercenary in its shift from location to location. There's no persistent setting or theme in the game, meaning that the variety of scenarios has been upped beyond anything possible in the previous games. Your squad's round-trip is half Bill Bryson, half Tom Clancy, a megamix of plausible political hotspots: Ukraine, Philippines, South Korea, Kashmir, Columbia. The most striking change, however, comes from a mission protecting a senator in a motorcade. With two of your team in civvies, it feels more like something out of a *Hitman* game, a far cry from the typical *Conflict* climes. And then there's the subsequent battle in a cinema...

Helicopters and tanks are still cause for mortal concern that, if it turns into panic, can easily result in the swift massacre of your entire quartet

regardless of how steep or comically suicidal the resulting drop.

The search to make the gunplay more worthwhile and less throwaway has led Pivotal to studiously observe a number of games, from paying careful attention to *Halo*'s subtly supportive reticule, and the way it slows just so when hovered over an enemy, to stopwatch timing the speed at which characters can spin in games like *SOCOM* and *Ghost Recon*. The consequence of such fine-tuning isn't immediately evident in Pivotal's demonstration, but there are more obvious tweaks visible. Characters can lean around corners and shoot – hardly a groundbreaking option, but its use during combat makes it a fundamental new addition. Plus, characters can now vault objects, such as boxes and handrails, just by pressing up against them.

**Another flashback: this** time last year, the Vietnam war was a golden goose, the heir apparent to a glut of war titles that turned game shop shelves into galleries of gurning men with guns. A year on, the battle has turned somewhat into a paper tiger, responsible for a pile of mostly average outings – a conflict that the west, and its ample videogame war chest, has managed to lose. Is there something about Vietnam that makes it fundamentally tricky to capture in an entertaining videogame?

Bambra: "You could just see that, around the world, everyone was having the same meetings that we had about Vietnam in a scarily similar time frame. I think it's a fairly difficult thing to do. Story-wise, we handled Vietnam very well, and we didn't concentrate on the rights and wrongs of the war – shit happens, we said, and it happens to you. You've just got to survive and get back to base, which gives us a classic story of exploration and survival, which worked well. I think some of the other Vietnam games tackled a few issues that we didn't cover because we didn't want to. Although we like doing wargames, we don't like glorifying war as such. War is good, dramatic situations, problems to be solved – when you get into darker areas, it's not entertainment."

"That's the problem," continues McLean. "There's a certain amount of romanticism that exists around WWII. The Vietnam war, because of the political situation and the anger felt by all those involved, is considered a darker war, and a videogame seems almost like a flippant realisation of it, that seems somehow in bad taste compared to a game of WWII. I don't know why that should be – both my granddads were killed in WWII – but nevertheless it now seems almost impossible to do a game that's going to be particularly revered regarding the Vietnam war."

As Bambra says: "We don't like glorifying war." Which is a fair assessment of the even-handed *Conflict: Desert Storm* duo and their lack of tub-thumping. *Conflict: Global Terror*, however, has a title that feels like a provocative buzzword – as if George Bush made videogames – as much as an encapsulation of a conflict. Will there be an uproar?

McLean: "Do you think that's likely? Do you not think that the videogame-nasty thing has been shelved? The papers have had another go just recently, and now they're bored for another year or so. We're deliberately not going after governments or nationalities in *C:GT*. We're going after groups of individuals who are – hopefully unequivocally – up to no good. We're not having a go at a real-world government body, or a particular race or nationality. If we do court any controversy, it's likely to be triggered by some other event, generally something local or provincial, that goads and baits the tabloids into a call to action. From there it all escalates, a target is found and it'll be held aloft as being responsible."

Bambra: "Whether we like it or not, terrorism's been around for a long time. It is a fact of life, and I think we've tackled it in a good way. We've just said that there are people out there using terrorism for their own ends. We start with narco-terrorists in Columbia that are extracting cocaine and suppressing the population. We don't really deal with the rights and wrongs, we just shut them down."

*Conflict: Global Terror*'s focus feels fractured compared to the thematic focus of *Conflicts Desert Storm* and *Vietnam*, and it's the first in the series based purely on plausible scenarios without being restricted to definite events. Explains McLean: "Partly, we wanted the original *Desert Storm* characters back, which means a contemporary setting. And so the obvious route is the richness of doing it all in the current world." This new squad, despite featuring the names and likenesses of the Brits that made up the SAS portion of the *Desert Storm* games, are now American. Will this upset those people who enjoyed those *Fable*-style regional accents, and the relief it provided from the prevalent US twang of western videogames? "Yes," says McLean. "I loved the fact that we included British voices before, it made me very proud,

As part of the new engine, textures won't lose their detail upon closer inspection. Not that you'd want to be distracted during the heat of conflict



*Global Terror* offers set-pieces that feel far more open in terms of routes available to the player when crossing any given battlefield

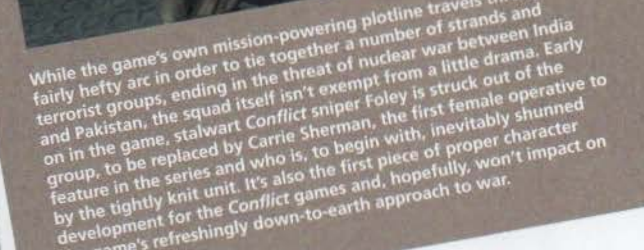
The project is at a far more advanced stage at this point in the development cycle in comparison to previous *Conflict* games, meaning there's generous time for Pivotal to tune everything to a much higher standard

Pivotal's fascination with war games isn't confined to the virtual arena. Its studio is host to an impressive tabletop war zone – perfect for a busman's tea break



New objectives are indicated by a flashing backpack receiver

## SOLDIER'S OLDER



While the game's own mission-powering plotline travels through a fairly hefty arc in order to tie together a number of strands and terrorist groups, ending in the threat of nuclear war between India and Pakistan, the squad itself isn't exempt from a little drama. Early on in the game, stalwart *Conflict* sniper Foley is struck out of the group, to be replaced by Carrie Sherman, the first female operative to feature in the series and who is, to begin with, inevitably shunned by the tightly knit unit. It's also the first piece of proper character development for the *Conflict* games and, hopefully, won't impact on the game's refreshingly down-to-earth approach to war.

and I thought it was something that really set the game apart." Bambra adds: "In the UK, yes, it will cause some upset. But we're in a global market, and unfortunately it makes it easier for us to sell it to the Americans instead of the Brits. George Bush may change that in time, however."

**"WE PRESENT OUR CHARACTERS AS SOLID GUYS. THEY SHOOT PEOPLE BECAUSE IT'S KILL OR BE KILLED."**

**Was Pivotal ever** tempted to go for that current pantomime villain of choice, al-Qa'ida? "Not really. We kicked around a few jokey ideas, like going for Bill Qa'ida instead," says Bambra. "I think that situation has to play out in reality first. We did seriously consider doing Afghanistan. But with *Desert Storm*, we started development ten years after the actual event. We couldn't have anticipated the controversy and the imminent events in the east. We wanted a wargame with modern, hi-tech equipment, and that was the Gulf war, a setting with stealth bombers and laser designators." McLean: "Personally, I don't like the idea of us tackling al-Qa'ida, as there isn't any need to. We can realise a game as well as we want and need to, without ever having to touch that. And if we can do it without courting sensationalism, I'd damned well prefer to do that."

"There's always that danger," offers Bambra. "You can't predict the media, they're always looking for a story. Videogames always make the odd story, as journalists look for angles. *GTA: Vice City* skirts much closer to the dark side than we do. We present our characters as solid, dependable special forces guys doing their job. They shoot people because it's kill or be killed."

*America's Ten Most Wanted*, a cheap and trashy cash-in on the terrorism theme using the FBI's top ten criminals-at-large as the ultimate boss characters, used recognised faces such as Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden as a shock tactic for selling a poor videogame. Were similar themes ever mooted? "That was never a temptation for us," says Bambra. "Our games are entertainment. I'd like them to be assessed on what they are. We take a credible real-world setting and make a game out of it. Like people have done for hundreds of years with novels, and, to a shorter extent, movies." McLean: "I'm not sure you'll get a bunch of genuinely talented people who would want to be involved with something like that. You can't be happy working on something like that."

Something like that, however, is a sign – regardless of how tasteless this particular sign may be – that games are at least unafraid to exploit the subject matter of modern-day terrorism directly, something that the movie industry is yet to do. World War II, Vietnam and Pearl Harbour were all made 'safe' by films, glamorised and desensitised, providing an instant cache of grandiose source material for games to mimic and slipstream. Is Pivotal aware of the fact that games are venturing into this new scenario of modern, global terrorism before the movie industry is? Bambra: "Maybe it's a first for the games business. We lead, they follow."



# For Everything



# A Reason

**The components of FEAR did not come together by accident. Nor are they entirely predictable. Vivendi silenced Monolith many times during FEAR's European press debut, but uncertainty is what fear's all about...**



Despite the much-touted immediacy of firstperson perspective, most shooters immerse you in little more than the entrails of your enemy. Locational atmosphere is one thing, cheap shock another, but inspiring acute emotions – beyond furious bloodlust and a faint sense of deity from the perfect headshot – is exponentially harder still. *System Shock 2* was perhaps the last FPS to effectively manage it: even the likes of Monolith's own *Aliens Vs Predator 2* relied on the anticipation of attack, the known rather than the unknown. And that is shock, not fear. Then along comes this with a name that's all intention: *FEAR*. It's spelling it out. It's going to scare you. So it says.

And it may just be right. Monolith has made a very wise decision in choosing its cinematic inspiration. For action and effects cues it took the familiar Hollywood route, while for intelligence, restraint and storyline it completely ignored it. *FEAR* is an unusual blend of over-the-top action and the dark, human horror of Japanese films. This may seem an odd blend at first, but from what we were shown it's hardly oil and water. More blood and fire, perhaps. Or gunpowder and lead.

The action aspects are deeply impressive, but we'll come to that. Or will we? Ah, the tension of uncertainty... such primal fears are central to the game's nature, though rest assured they're exercised somewhat more effectively than here. Monolith's director of technology Kevin Stephens readily cites The Ring series, The Grudge, The Eye and Dark Water as key filmic influences, and their basic tenets are well observed. Much Japanese horror focuses on ghosts, and derives impact from recognisably human forms stripped of their humanity – morality and mortality are no restrains on the unjustly dead, as signified by their subtly inhuman movements. *FEAR* uses its ghosts, normal(-ish)-looking people, even a child, in similarly disturbing ways. Hell is other people, but it's still subtlety that's key: it's the 'one thing wrong' principle. Which is scarier, letting yourself in to find the living room completely trashed, or to find a kitchen knife placed neatly in the centre of the carpet?

**It is lead** game designer **Craig Hubbard**'s stated desire to get under players' skins rather than in their faces, though Stephens is equally unequivocal that action was the driving factor. The small sections Monolith was prepared to share show these two things – the controlling power of the player's weapons and the need for a loss of control – can coexist, if the horror is

**Gunfights tear environments apart with the same viciousness that the supernatural elements sunder flesh. Such heated action will come as release, and relief, should the threat of the latter freeze you into inaction**

TITLE: **FEAR**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **Q2 2005**



The game opens with a hostage situation that's quickly and brutally compounded by the appearance of an angry ghost

properly tailored. "We're focusing on supernatural rather than psychological horror," says Hubbard, "so the fit is actually pretty comfortable. The game is similar in tone to something like Aliens, which is part war movie, part horror movie. *FEAR* is part stylised action blockbuster, part ghost story." But why the move away from western traditions for the story elements but not for the action? "Part of it is that we wanted to do something different. Aliens, mutants, and demons have been pretty well covered in games, but nobody has really done a firstperson action ghost story. It's also a matter of personal preference. Many of us prefer horror that gets under your skin to monsters jumping out of closets." And, unless you happen to be Michael Barrymore, you can't experience both.

In true Japanese style, the world around the ghostliness is disarmingly normal. *FEAR* actually stands (in only a slightly crowbarred way) for First Encounter Assault and Recon, the name of the team you fight with. Despite being notably unwilling to divulge much in the way of plot detail, or indeed anything else, Stephens confirms they are not any kind of paranormal hit squad. This is not the X-Files. The game opens with the FEAR unit choppering over a city after terrorists storm a downtown research building. The initial unit of presumably non-elite troops has been wiped out, and, after landing to heavy resistance, things start to go wrong for you, too. Strange electrical bursts affect communications and the building's power, screens fuzz over, you catch glimpses of a child in the flickering lights: basically, you should have stayed at home. But several things are at work to draw you in, to leverage that famous immersion factor of the FPS.

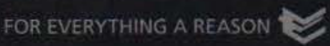
Hubbard says: "We felt the experience would be scarier and more intense if you didn't have that subtle layer of separation you get when you're playing as somebody else. Obviously, the firstperson perspective is inherently involving, but the fewer reminders there are that it's some other character, the easier it is to suspend your disbelief." Yet in the past, with *Blood* and most visibly the often-overlooked *No One Lives Forever*, Monolith took the opposite view. *NOLF*'s Cate Archer was a very strong character whose nature was central to the plot. Why the switch? "It was an exciting challenge to try something at the other end of the spectrum from where we'd gone in the past," according to Hubbard.

Hence it's your first day at work, meaning your own learning process is mirrored in your character and the way the team react to him. Or perhaps even a stocky 'her'. 'You' are never named, have no colour and no face – find a reflection and all you see is a mask. So far, so familiar, but you also have a visible body rather than a small circular shadow to hover above. A body you can use. There are variations of flying and sliding kicks, each accompanied by the sight of your legs flailing in true martial arts fashion. Such attacks are very powerful – as getting close enough to use them is difficult, the reward, it was felt, should be considerable. Yet even if you accept that a creeping sense of dread can flourish despite such player puissance, that strength and vulnerability can be balanced. What of external factors? Isn't a slowly ratcheting sense of fear fundamentally at odds with the quicksave nature of the FPS? "Not really," says Hubbard.





*FEAR*'s multiplayer excludes the airborne insertions (left), but players can construct their own magic moments with the choking clouds of smoke and debris kicked up by stray fire, or the satisfying one-kick-kill melee (top). As in *Half-Life 2*'s deathmatch, it's the same tools but a different experience



"The type of atmosphere and suspense we're interested in is more about situational and environmental cues than specific threats. A game like *Far Cry* benefits from limited saves because a lot of the tension comes from the very real danger that an enemy may pop out and attack you at any moment. The mood we're trying to create is more about your imagination than things jumping out to kill you."

So the terrorist enemies are one thing, letting the game go about its visceral shooter-business as it wants. The supernatural elements work separately, more as a hostile environment. Without audio, *FEAR* is impressive though not scary: lights flicker, shadows crumble like open graves in the rain and figures appear briefly from nowhere. With audio, however, walking *FEAR*'s mad corridors is at once brutal and unnerving. Aural detail and quality are as impressive as their graphical equivalents, perhaps not surprising from the people who created *No One Lives Forever*'s consistently brilliant in-game soundtrack. Much is familiar, both as a game and as a narrative, but it's the little things that aren't quite right that do the best damage. Such events are generated in-game, but this convention is broken too. Much of the story is told in cut-scenes.

## THE MAKING OF MONOLITH



**BLOOD**

**This 1997 horror-western was guaranteed success with shooter and horror buffs alike, recounting undead gunslinger Caleb's relentless trail of revenge on an Old West occult society, the Cabal. Carried on a tide of gore, inventive level design and constant sly tips of the hat to the horror genre (both film and literature), its black wit hasn't dated: a perfect early example of Monolith's ability to exploit cult culture in its titles.**

**Walking FEAR's mad corridors is at once brutal and unnerving. Aural detail and quality are as impressive as their graphical equivalents**

Cut-scenes? Can such non-interactivity be rehabilitated so long after *Half-Life*? Even now, *Metal Gear Solid 3* is arguing 'no' with nearly five hours of movie between the player and the game. Is this what 'cinematic' should mean? "It really comes down to what you're trying to achieve," says Hubbard. "You have to weigh the benefits against the drawbacks. For example, if you put the player in a Higgins boat approaching Omaha Beach, there's a stronger sense of immersion than you'd get with a non-interactive cut-scene, which is





Slow time (above) is dramatic, though less so if you're far from the action when it kicks in, leaving you with a long moonwalk



Key to both of *FEAR*'s play modes are meatily exaggerated ragdoll reactions that catapult bodies into the air or slam them into walls with a limitless wire-stunt budget

## THE MAKING OF MONOLITH

### SHOGO: MOBILE ARMOUR DIVISION

1998 saw Monolith turn its attention to another genre ripe for homage: anime. Spearing the shrill angst and vacuous plotlines of the lowest grade of the stuff worked almost too well, but *Shogo*'s trump card was dividing play between on-foot shootouts and city-wide mech battles. Wisely, it was largely only the scale that changed between the two, making skyscraper-hopping duels as preternaturally fluid as the source material demanded.

*FEAR*'s assassin squads (right) move with unpredictable, feral speed, making them almost as difficult to hit when visible as when their optic camouflage is engaged

great. But because it's scripted, you run the risk of players missing key moments if they're looking in the wrong direction. Also, while it may be exhilarating the first time, it can become tedious if you have to sit through it every time you replay the level. With a cut-scene, you sacrifice some experiential immediacy and interactivity, but you have more control over the visual storytelling. Plus, it's really easy to skip it the next time. In the end, all that matters is the player's experience. A well-done cut-scene can be incredibly powerful. So can a well-done scripted sequence. One isn't 'better' than the other, each just has advantages and disadvantages."

**Creepy, broken-minded** and occasionally gory as the ghost element is, there's no denying it's Stephens who appears to be right – action is really the driving force, as exemplified by the complete absence of a supernatural element to the multiplayer game. If horror is the hook, viciously hectic shooting is the rail from which it's hanging. The ability to slow time in *FEAR* has been much talked about, and fortunately it seems more than just a *Max Payne* exercise in 'cool'. At times, enemies are so numerous, so indistinct – black-clad paramilitaries shooting from the shadows, near-invisible ninjas in electrical stealth suits, for instance – that it's almost a necessity. What conditions trigger it, how often it will be available and why you have this ability is yet to be revealed, but what is a surprise is that it works in multiplayer, too. Perhaps the Monolith server orbits the time-stretching event horizon of the black hole at the centre of the galaxy? No. All players are slowed, but the one with the Matrix-like power-up (indeed, The One) is slowed less and gains a faster fire rate. It's a tidy trick



Another disturbing figure involved in *FEAR*'s storyline is an interrogator with a cannibalistic technique, recently broken out of custody by the *FEAR* team member your character replaces. Monolith has, understandably, offered little indication of how the story threads will meet during play

and works well. What's more, in all modes certain weapons create smoke and debris clouds easily thick enough to obscure your target, which could have been irritating but, we can vouch, adds an interesting new dynamic to firefights.

Having last used traditional node-based AI way back on *NOLF*, Monolith now utilises a navigation mesh system that allows the AI to travel almost anywhere. Enemies use cover and attempt to flush you out if you try the same, and we experienced firsthand their ability to flank

**Creepy, broken-minded and occasionally gory as the ghost element is, there's no denying action is really the driving force**



– though Stephens maintains there are several intelligence types and they do not all repeat the same trick. Indeed, the AI was said to be finished before January, with all work since aimed at tweaking maps to cater for underused abilities and making their actions fun to counter.

Yet some may still believe this to be sharp Japanese horror nailed to typical Hollywood-esque excess for an otherwise ordinary shooter. Is this really 'The Matrix meets The Ring' and no more? For the cynics, Hubbard's completely non-star-struck response regarding Monolith's 'cinematic, Hollywood' values should be particularly heartening: "There are certain fundamental principles that apply to *all* visual arts. The way you frame a shot in a movie follows the same compositional rules that apply to oil paintings, photographs, or theatrical plays. It's not about the medium – it's about human psychology." As is, of course, the emotion of fear. Even ignoring the supernatural elements, this is already a markedly exuberant game, visually, dynamically and aurally. As a whole, it's possible *FEAR* will be one of the most involving and exciting firstperson shooters of 2005. Probable? Ah, the tension of uncertainty…

### THE MAKING OF MONOLITH



**NO ONE LIVES FOREVER**

2000 may have been *Deus Ex*'s year, but Monolith's entry at least didn't take itself so painfully seriously. Switching genres yet again to the stylised '60s of the Avengers, U.N.C.L.E. and, naturally, Austin Powers, *NOLF* had the verve of previous Monolith games, but with a more pronounced, playful accessibility – in no small part thanks to rapid-fire (over) dramatic set-pieces, such as a memorable skydiving gunfight.

# CHILL FACTOR

**When the most dangerous creature is the one you're standing on it's probably wise to expect a different kind of survival horror experience...**

It's hardly surprising that fear in videogames is only beginning to progress beyond the Romero school of shlock horror. The most successful horror movies skilfully manipulate emotion with story, character, mood and most of all suspense. But suspense is a delicate business, borne out of a mastery of pace and editing – in a movie the director leaves nothing to chance, but can you really orchestrate suspense in a videogame when the player is at the controls, going at his own pace?

With *Cold Fear*, Darkworks wants to put the player through the emotional wringer and to **Antoine Vilette**, the company's president and the game's scriptwriter, player control is an opportunity rather than a problem. "Fear is a primal, instinctive emotion, but I think that it is a noble emotion," he argues. "It's one that is important and beneficial. The next generation of hardware will allow us to reach a wider panel of emotions, using tools such as close-ups and facial animations. I think the strength of videogames over other media is that it allows the player to master, decide and control. Letting an emotion grab you in a dark theatre can be a strong experience, but learning to master it is clearly as strong, though different."

Mastery over both fear and the environment is paramount as *Cold Fear* begins with tumultuous noise and sickening motion. As coastguard Tom Hanson, you're dropped on to a Russian whaling ship adrift on the Bering Sea. As survival horror plots dictate, it soon becomes apparent that the crew has been wiped out by a mysterious deadly force. What 'normal' crew members remain are unfriendly, and even the ship itself is a danger. Pitching hazardously from side to side, your first task is to avoid the crashing waves and keep your footing. Plunging overboard is a distinct possibility.

"Fear is a primal, instinctive emotion, but I think that it is a noble emotion, it's one that is important and beneficial. The next generation of hardware will allow us to reach a wider panel of emotions"

The ship's motion is terrifically conveyed, and the rolling sea both magisterial and threatening. A 'resistance' bar displays how close the hero is to losing his footing, though it's possible to grab hold of nearby rails for extra purchase. It cannot be overestimated how fundamental the ship is to *Cold Fear*'s unique feel. To Vilette it is the game's most terrifying enemy: "When we create a new monster, we always ask ourselves: 'What kind of horrible death will it inflict? What will make it really dangerous?' For the locations we follow the same process: 'What horrific death can I expect here? How will I use it during combat if necessary?'"




Lurching across the ship can be a dangerous kind of slapstick. Large ballast suspended by ropes sways dangerously into the hero's path, though it's also possible to use such hazards to lure enemies to their doom. In truth, the constant swaying heightens the atmosphere and conveys a sense of place magnificently, but the resistance meter seems a bit gimmicky. Once you get used to the rhythm of the ship it becomes redundant, but get inside and the mood alters dramatically. Away from the rain and wind the gentle rumbling of the joypad added to the sound of a heartbeat slowing and increasing further escalates tension. They're hardly new innovations, but are implemented with some finesse.

Fixed camera positions are also a notable inclusion, though this is not a decision everyone will applaud. On the one hand they give designers more control over cinematic framing and delivering shocks, but the obvious downside is that any unscripted action can become frustrating when the perspective flicks between camera views. Darkworks

TITLE: **COLD FEAR**
FORMAT: **PS2/XBOX/PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **DARKWORKS**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE DATE: **MARCH**



## ROCKY HORROR

After the disappointing sales of *Alone In The Dark IV* and a subsequent canned title, we asked Antoine Vilette, president of Darkworks, about what it takes to beat Capcom at its own game.

***Alone In The Dark IV*** **was an ambitious project that tried to expand the horizons of survival horror. How well do you feel the genre has evolved in the time since?**
One can see that all developers who have worked within the genre have tried to make it evolve in some way (multiplayer, online, FPS, adventure...) and Capcom has always been in the forefront of these experimentations. But only a few titles stood out. The *Resident Evil* franchise, because of its success and exceptional qualities, has marked the genre so deeply that it froze it while at the same time killing the competition. 'How can we do better than perfection?' we asked ourselves, all the more since we had far more limited means. We had to wait for the whole videogame industry to evolve with such titles as *Halo*, *GTA* or *Half-Life 2* to overcome this inferiority complex. I have the feeling that we're off to a new start.

***USS Antarctica*** **shared some of the themes of** ***Cold Fear*** **– exposure to the elements, the shipbound nature, an unknown threat – but unfortunately you weren't able to find a publisher for that title. Is** ***Cold Fear*** **a more marketable take on a concept you wanted to explore?**
I think the *USS Antartica* project was a bit too much ahead of its time (it still is, by the way). The *USS* concept was clearly more complex and less understandable. That said, we also had to experiment a lot and build many prototypes to make *Cold Fear* possible. It's true that the *USS* project missed this investigation period.

**Is it difficult to convey the sense of the elements – bitter cold, lashing rain, the waterlogged atmosphere – to a player who'll be experiencing the game from the comfort of their living room?**
We recommend playing with the lights off and with headphones on. But I've seen players during playtesting jump out of their seats while there were more than ten other people in the room. You could see sweat marks on the pads at the end of some sessions, and I've seen many players shift from a stretched-out, relaxed position on their couch to a seated position on the edge of the same couch, their body rigid and stressed like never before.

Press the triangle button and Hanson grabs hold of nearby rails or objects to prevent a dunking. The resistance meter is rarely referenced, though, and it feels like a gimmick (above left). Gun down an enemy and if you're quick enough you can extinguish its life by stomping on its head. Most enemies offer up ammo or health boosts

A bullet in the head at close range provides bloody, visceral entertainment that's likely to get the game an 18+ rating. The similarities between this and *Resident Evil 4* are obvious






## CREATURE COMFORTS

After a few hours of play, you might notice that there are not many creature types to contend with. While we're loath to spoil the plot, it's hardly the biggest surprise when you discover the zombie-like appearance of your human enemies is due to a parasite that can crawl inside bodies. Destroy the undead by mashing the head, and the parasite leaves its host and comes for you. Their lengthy tendrils are deadly, and the speed at which they move across all surfaces is truly panic inducing. It's a vital touch.

has a novel solution: it uses both. "If he decides to, the player can play the whole of *Cold Fear* using the over-the-shoulder perspective," explains Vilette. "He will have a different experience from the player who chooses to play with both camera systems: it will be more immediate, and it will also feel more like a classic videogame. But the atmosphere will still be present and oppressive. He will not escape the 'bad' surprises."

After a decade of slow-moving zombies, unwieldy weapons and annoying camera views it's ironic that two survival horror rivals, Darkworks and Capcom, should come up with the same solution simultaneously. And, much like *Resident Evil 4*, the new system gives players a much easier time with targeting and developing the accuracy to pinpoint those vital headshots.

***Alone In The** Dark IV* was rightly criticised for its poor combat, and Darkworks clearly wants to make amends this time round. Three hours into the game, it's noticeable that puzzle solving is minimal – you find nothing more taxing than turning on a sprinkler system to extinguish a fire in a corridor. The conscious decision to move from conundrums – and *AITD IV* had some wonderful puzzles – to action seems commercially motivated. "Having enemies that attack at long range and move really fast, the ability to shoot while moving, or using the surroundings as a weapon introduces a real tactical dimension to the combat," says Vilette. "The universe and the graphical style of *Cold Fear* are also really differentiating. We are closer to a disaster movie such as Perfect Storm rather than a road movie like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. I think we are investigating a new branch of the horror games tree." Yet the over-the-shoulder viewpoint in *Cold Fear* isn't perfect. In the PS2 code we've played, the analogue aiming isn't as precise as it could be. The handgun is the default weapon, giving you a red laser sight and a torch beam to help you see and dispatch the enemies. But their speed and jerky movements, alongside the pitch and roll of the ship, make it all too easy to waste a full cartridge before they're tearing at your flesh. Steadying yourself by grabbing hold of a piece of scenery certainly helps, but it'll be interesting to see if the Xbox and PC versions deliver tightened-up control.

"The universe and the graphical style of Cold Fear are also differentiating. We are closer to a disaster movie such as Perfect Storm. I think we are investigating a new branch of the horror games tree"

Despite the targeting issue, there's no question that the action is intense and satisfying. To help avoid frustration ammo and health is dished out generously (at least on the default difficulty setting). Though some health packs and ammo rounds can be picked up from set locations there's also a percentage chance that an enemy killed will provide you with either a medikit or an ammo clip if you search the body. As in *Resident Evil 4*, it's an approach that encourages you to plug enemies with bullets rather than take the miser's option and avoid conflict.

But is *Cold Fear* a new kind of survival horror experience? Not really. It looks beautiful, has an interesting premise and a genuinely uncomfortable atmosphere, but it uses familiar videogame tropes, such as bodies suddenly animating, creatures smashing through floorboards and parasites attacking from above. The shocks can be fun, but that appears to be the extent of the terror on offer: action interspersed with sudden surprises. There's certainly nothing here as sophisticated as the unnerving insanity effects of *Eternal Darkness*, for example.

Initial investigation suggests that *Cold Fear* is a fine addition to the genre but not really the new direction Darkworks claims. As for success? Like the skilful evocation of suspense, it all comes down to timing, but in this instance missing the boat – ie, appearing after *Resident Evil 4* – might not be the problem it would first appear, since Capcom's game may have only whetted appetites of survival horror followers everywhere...



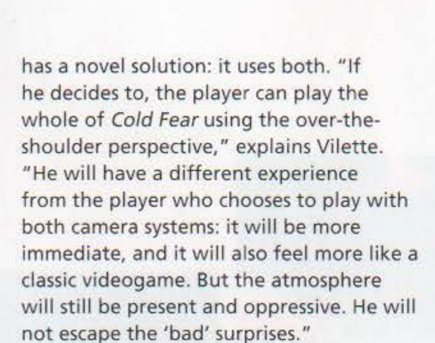

Movement is much slower when you use the over-the-shoulder viewpoint, but it feels more natural and, well, safe. After some initial fumbling, you'll most likely find yourself playing almost entirely from this perspective









If an enemy gets too close you can wrestle it off by repeatedly pressing the square button followed by R1 (above right). The sounds and the menace of an angry ocean have been captured magnificently (above) – damage is inflicted if large waves hit you, but there's also a chance of getting flung overboard. It's good to see enemies giving chase up staircases (right), though not through doors. After the horror of the whaling vessel, an oil rig is promised in the concluding chapter



# SCARE TACTICS

## EXPLORING THE BLOODY BATTLEGROUND BETWEEN FEAR AND FRUSTRATION

Everyone has nightmares. And, more than that, everyone has the same nightmares. Your feet freeze to the spot, limbs flooded with freezing lead. You can't turn your head, but you know it's there. You know it's coming. You can feel it shuffling, shuddering, snuffling towards you, but you still can't move. Its arms whip round your neck, tightening like wire. Inside, you're screaming, 'Move, move, move!' But nothing comes. Frantic for breath, what's left inside you leaches out in chokes and whimpers. The pressure on your throat never eases, your life draining out like paint from a kicked-over tin. In nightmares, what happens next is you wake up. In *Ocarina Of Time*, what happens next is you break free, hit the Redead 14 times with your sword and collect your well-earned rupees. But which is scarier?

Fear and entertainment have gone hand in hand for as long as there have been records, and the psychology behind that relationship has never been particularly puzzling. There's a straightforward pleasure in the gentle sting of adrenaline that a safe scare brings, and there's a straightforward relief in confronting unbearable real-world threats in a manageable fictional environment. From ghost stories to passion plays, from gothic poems to slasher films, mankind has always revelled in idle terror. But in the context of videogaming, that word – idle – becomes a very interesting one. Fictional fear, whether in print or on stage, has always been balanced by the audience's lack of involvement in the action. The fear it offers is entirely vicarious – you're watching *it* happening to *them*, and your horrified helplessness to keep them safe combines deliciously with your smug sense of personal security.

In games, things are very different. Games, uniquely, are able to threaten you directly, although not, of course, with the horrors unfolding on screen. Games can't project Cacodemons into your living room or teleport Metroids under your bed, but they can impinge on the reality of your life. They can destroy the progress you've painstakingly made; they can take two hours of your life and tear them up in front of your eyes. Games can hurt you in a way that nothing else can.

It's this unique ability that has become a mainstay of the games that seek to scare. The survival horror template defined by *Resident Evil* relies on keeping the player on a knife-edge between success and failure. It communicates vulnerability by limiting your ammunition and rationing your health – refusing you the buffers that most games let you build up. It creates complex and threatening environments and then refuses to let you master them – denying you the jumping and running which let you walk tall in most action games. The result is the strange irony which is at the heart of most classics of the genre: in a game where each bullet has never mattered more, the game creates a control system in which firing has never been clumsier. It's crucial that the tension of each moment isn't undercut by the increasing skill of the player. As an approach, it's strengthened by the way it contradicts everything that gaming has taught you: games are the place where you are strong, where you're the hero. Scary games are the place where you're weak, and where you're punished for that weakness by repetition and boredom.

## GAMES CAN'T PROJECT CACODEMONS INTO YOUR LIVING ROOM, BUT THEY CAN IMPINGE ON THE REALITY OF YOUR LIFE

**Hang on. Suddenly** the idea that games are scarier than nightmares doesn't seem to hold much water after all. That traditional survival horror template does a fairly systematic job of explaining the contradiction at the heart of scary games. Games that want to capitalise on their ability to hurt you in the real world can only do it by threatening loss of progress and repetition, and that repetition invariably dulls the fright of the horrors that the game has in store for you. It's an issue that undermines many of the most successful frighteners ever made. *Fatal Frame 2*, from the moment the first ghostly hand slips on to Mio's shoulder, does a masterful job of creating a sickening, threatening world. But the moment you become more concerned about finding a save point than finding your sister, all that atmospheric effort becomes irrelevant. Replaying sections of *Doom 3* has all the terror

### SCARE TACTIC NO 1
**ANOTHER WORLD**



Breathtaking, unfamiliar, French: even the traditionally safe intro saw the player alone and unarmed but for a can of pop and a desk that, a lightning bolt later, would be sinking into murky, alien depths. But in one of gaming's first set-piece-dominated experiences, the opening flight from undersea tentacles was just a mild precursor to the game's next stick-wrenching turn.

From a nearby vantage point, a local four-legged behemoth was even less happy about your presence than you were. Having stalked you via a succession of early screens, the beast wasted no further time in appearing, mere inches away, to give you an unwelcome peck on the cheek. Even with its linear chain of events rehearsed, the ensuing chase has never failed to send nerves and expletives flying. Delphine was never again to peak this level of horror until 1994's release of basketball beat 'em up *Shaq Fu*.



Short skirts and bare legs come as standard in games like *Fatal Frame 2*, but it's not a lazy attempt at sexualisation. The more closely you identify with Mio, the more vulnerable her nakedness makes you feel. Doc Martens and combats wouldn't have the same effect

## SCARE TACTIC NO 2
### RESCUE ON FRACTALUS




The first memory of a *Fractalus* veteran will be one of gaming's most heart-wrenching jump scares – when the rescue routine of a downed pilot sprinting to your ship through the corrosive atmosphere ends with a terrible alien face lunging up and hammering through the canopy with its fists. But that moment wasn't *Fractalus*' masterstroke of fear. More insidiously, it was every rescue after it, as dread and mistrust sets in. The finger that once rested on the airlock door release now hovers over the key that will raise the ship's shields and disintegrate your boarder. The sound of approaching bootfalls lasts forever; the moment when they're out of view beneath the fuselage even longer. Waiting for the friend-or-foe signal, shock or relief. If it's a real pilot, your hesitation is costing them oxygen: they'll die a slab of steel away from rescue. If it's a real pilot. What are you waiting for?

of a fairground duck shoot as you wait for zombies to shamble into place. All too often, the interactivity of games can undermine their scariness, rather than enhance it.

Even when games do a good job of managing your anxiety over gameplay consequences, the result is often an emotional mish-mash rather than an exercise in terror. Just what is it that shoots through you when Yoshi loses hold of Mario in *Yoshi's Island*? It makes your heart pound and your palms flash with sweat, no question. Mario's desperate bleats assault your ears as all your skill deserts you in your desperate flounderings to recover him. But just what is it that you're feeling? Panic? Certainly. Anxiety? Sure. Guilt? A little bit. But fear? Not really. Face off with a boss in *Devil May Cry* and you're likely to swallow a gulp. You're daunted by his size, nervous about your performance, dread-filled at the prospect of repeated defeats. Scared? Not so's you'd notice.

These emotions – stress, panic, anxiety – are things that games do brilliantly. It's notable that in *Eternal Darkness*, one of gaming's most sophisticated attempts to unsettle its players, it's the gameplay insanity effects which proved the most effective. From the controller unplugged error to the 'Now deleting saves' message, the things that had gamers leaping to their feet, hearts in mouths, were the things

## SCARE TACTIC NO 3
### DESCENT



For all that panic and fear aren't the same thing, the first is a fertile breeding ground for the second. *Descent*'s gameplay was stressful enough, as you struggled to master the controls and clenched down on your lunch through the flips and spirals of the architecture. But at the end of each level – after you emptied your rockets into the reactor and triggered the fatal chain reaction – stress blossomed into panic and panic blossomed into fear. There are only so many primal impluses your brain can handle at once before suffering an emotional whiteout. The urge to escape is a powerful one, more so when what you're fleeing is man's oldest enemy, fire. Combined with the sickening desperation of *Descent*'s claustrophobia, the modern malaise of Time Running Out and a hint of motion sickness, the result was a state of psychological turmoil that became something to fear in and of itself.

which threatened their game progress, not their game character. And despite the horrified shouts and the panicked lunges towards the memory cards, these tricks weren't genuinely frightening.

**But games can** do fear – true, simple fear. The shared horror that *Ocarina* players have of the Redeads isn't imagined. They scared us. They made us afraid. So how do games accomplish this strange feat of making us respond to a pretend person facing a pretend threat? To answer that, the first step is to take the debate out of the shadow of *Resident Evil*. There's no doubting the series' importance, but to focus on such a narrow definition is to ignore the much wider spectrum of games which use fear to manipulate their players. The Japanese tradition that it inspired, which grew to include the *Silent Hill*, *Fatal Frame* and others, unquestionably suffers the worst from this tension between fear of the world the game creates and anxiety over the gameplay consequences it threatens. Western developers have been able to take a different route, by employing the directness of a firstperson perspective. Games like *System Shock 2* and *Thief* sidestep the issue of camera control by forcing the player to *be* where he wants to *see*, and the improved manoeuvrability and combat

forces designers to create other ways of preserving the level of threat he faces.

It's also unfair to use the *Resident Evil* template as evidence for the argument that the survival horror genre has stagnated, not least because Capcom itself has taken interesting strides to address the traditions of the series with *Resident Evil 4* (read the review on p76 to see how well it fared). But our assumptions about the survival horror badge tend to exclude more interesting titles that are finding ways to evolve the ability of games to terrify their players. *Manhunt* was automatically dubbed 'stealth-action', or some other awkward hybrid, on its release. But had it originated from Capcom or Konami, it's likely it would have been billed as a new twist on survival horror. It's certainly an interesting template. In Cash it gives you a hero who is toweringly strong – vicious, merciless and muscle-bound – but succeeds in creating an environment where he's believable and painfully vulnerable. It plays the revulsion card effectively – Piggsy is a hard man-thing to forget once you've met him. It manages the transition from hunted to hunter without ever losing sight of the need to make you feel you're fighting for your life.

But where *Manhunt* really expands the genre is by scaring you not with what you see but what you do. It's a game that forces you to acknowledge the pleasure (so cardinal to many games) you take in pretending to be a murderer. It forces you to watch as you develop a pathology, coming to rely on successful killing spots and to favour particular weapons. Those who committed to *Manhunt*'s atmosphere could easily become more disturbed by their own response to the game than by the game itself. For all the empty controversy it provoked, there's no question it's one of the most interesting new avenues opened up in gaming in recent years.

**As you step** away from the core survival horror template, the range of games which qualify for inclusion widens dramatically. And the more you include, the more a pattern emerges about how scary games accomplish what they do. The most striking thing, particularly in light of the lavish and diabolically imaginative images that grace these pages, is that it's not what you see that scares you. There's no doubt it helps – *Fatal Frame*'s Blinded wouldn't have been so terrible without her twisted bones and choking hair – but if you want proof that it's not the visuals that pack the scariest punches, go back to *The Lurking Horror*, one of Infocom's most celebrated text adventures (and available for download thanks to Home Of The Underdogs at www.the-underdogs.org). The speed with which the reassuring normality of a university computer room gives way to primal, savage horror is remarkable, and well worth the initial frustrations of 'I don't know the word "use".'

What *The Lurking Horror* does have, however, is what all scary games share: truly excellent, truly horrible audio. As one of the first text adventures to include sounds, it picks its moments brilliantly to startle you with unexpected and unsettling noises. For all the tensions that *Super Metroid* heaps on you throughout your adventure, nothing sets the tone as effectively as those first terrifying techno-snarls. Could *Siren* have scared you so utterly and exhaustingly if sight-jacking hadn't been accompanied by that awful, frenzied panting? *Silent Hill 2* takes the principle to its logical conclusion, using the sounds of monsters to terrify you more than the monsters themselves. One section is dominated by the sound of a Doorman, close by but never seen, the threat communicated only by the sickening noises you've learned to dread so much. In fact, you're entirely safe – the Doorman isn't strictly in-game at all, penned into a remote ledge just so he can add his voice to your fear. Indeed, *Silent Hill* understands the power of sounds so well it names half its monsters after them, a horrifying orchestra of screams, groans, scratches and flutters. And sound, of course, is integral in the terror of the Redeads, from their paralysing shriek to Link's suffocated whimpers.

But sound and vision are only part of the common armoury that games share with other media which set out to scare. Character, back-story, cut-scene, jump scares – all add to the atmosphere that games work so hard to create. But is that really the best answer to the question? That games, at their best, can only be scary by copying film? That their USP of being able to directly threaten the audience will remain a flawed and under-exploited possibility? It seems unlikely that in such a vibrant area of development that can remain the case for long. The evolution of *Resident Evil*, combined with the resurgence of western interest evident in the prospect of *Cold Fear* (p54), FEAR (p44) and in news (finally) of a George A Romero title (p19), means it's highly improbable that new ground won't be opened up.

And if it is, the results could be incomparably powerful. Because for all of the flaws of scary games, and for all of the ways in which more established media can better them, games have a potential which nothing else shares. Games teach. Games tutor you in circumstances and their consequences. Games ingrain ideas and associations into your mind, and nothing can match their effectiveness in doing so. And so, like the very worst nightmares, the very best games only get scarier when they stop. The trainyards in *Manhunt* may play host to some pretty tense gameplay, but what about when you're walking late, alone, into the dark of the station car park? Can you honestly say there's not a moment of sick hesitation? Can you catch your foot on a scruff of loose linoleum without feeling the tiniest stab of Silent Hill panic? When a power-cut hits and you clumsily lurch for the candles, isn't there sometimes the echo of two Delsabers warping in behind you, just like your worst moments in *Phantasy Star Online*? And when that fear hits, it's far, far too late to be reaching for the pause button.

Sweet dreams.

## IS THAT THE BEST ANSWER TO THE QUESTION? THAT GAMES, AT THEIR BEST, CAN ONLY BE SCARY BY COPYING FILM?

### SCARE TACTIC NO 4
#### ELVIRA: MISTRESS OF THE DARK



A uniquely game-oriented fear common to RPGs is the horrifying realisation of knowing exactly what you're up against – of flicking through tables of charts and figures to realise you've encountered the monster on the third level that can only be hit by magical weapons. Local-grown horror-adventure *Elvira* had no shortage of nasty moments in-game, but by accident, design, or mistaken identity one of its best threats never even existed. Listed in the manual's table of enemy statistics was a ferociously powerful 'Water Monster'. Thus forewarned, when you finally found yourself having to navigate the brackish waters of the castle moat, every moment was spent in expectation of this terrible creature emerging from the murk. The fact that it never did seemed like blessed luck at the time, though later playthroughs would reveal the moat's inhabitant to be entirely imaginary.

# Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

## Now playing...

### Fantavision



Even before *Rez*, Katsuyuki Kanetaka knew light and sound and hope would save the world: sometimes, you just need to spend a weekend proving him right.
PS2, SCEJ

### Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat



Not since *Jet Set Radio*'s perfect grinds has the combo quest been so spectacularly presented. The pain of progress makes this a game where the gloves come on, not off.
GC, NINTENDO

### Frequency



Though *Amplitude* marked a step up in terms of MTV-friendly spit and polish, it's the pared down strobes and breaks of the original that stand the test of time.
PS2, SCEA

## Home is where the heart is

### Publishers should spend longer in their bedrooms




*Darwinia*'s box art, and its graphical design in general, is a perfect extension of the game's style and purpose. The result, presumably, of the game's creators keeping control rather than it passing to a disconnected marketing department

Everyone knows what to expect from homebrew games: a nice idea and some slightly shonky execution. There are two things that you don't expect: a £30 price tag or lavish, polished presentation. And that means you're not expecting *Darwinia*.

Calling it homebrew is unfair, of course. Just because the game was cooked up in a bedroom doesn't mean it's not a professional, commercial operation; Introversion's first game, *Uplink*, was successful enough to fund the development of its second. And, as a commercial game developer, it has every right to charge full price for its fully featured game. Paying for a download may be an unfamiliar feeling for some gamers, but for *Darwinia* to flourish in the shops its download price can't undercut its retail version.

And for that £30 you get some things that most major publishers are scrabbling to achieve. Elegant box art, for a start – a distinctive, eye-catching design that manages to communicate the style of the game and hint at its plot. A genuinely engaging mascot, for another. Sony has been struggling for ten years to invent a character with the immediate recognition factor and the charm of the flat outline of a Darwinian. Start the game up and you're greeted with intros which have a confidence and a sense of identity which only the rarest pearls of big-budget games – *Vice City*, for example – can match. There's no question that *Darwinia* delivers what you expect it to – a leftfield, quirky game design – but the fact that it can go toe to toe with major publishers on the peripheral features of the game should be a cause for concern for all of them.

This isn't to suggest that *Darwinia* can match the majesty of something like *Rome: Total War*. It never set out to – Introversion has more sense than that. There's no question that almost every element of its design is the result of the developer cutting its cloth to fit its very limited resources. But when done well, that isn't a criticism. At a time when names as hallowed as Will Wright (see p18) are preoccupied with how games can meet the escalating costs of content creation, and when games are still in thrall to Hollywood rather than forging their own identity, it's homebrew that's leading the way.


















**Edge**'s scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



# RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), MARCH 18 (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: PRODUCTION STUDIO 4 PREVIOUSLY IN: E135, E138, E143





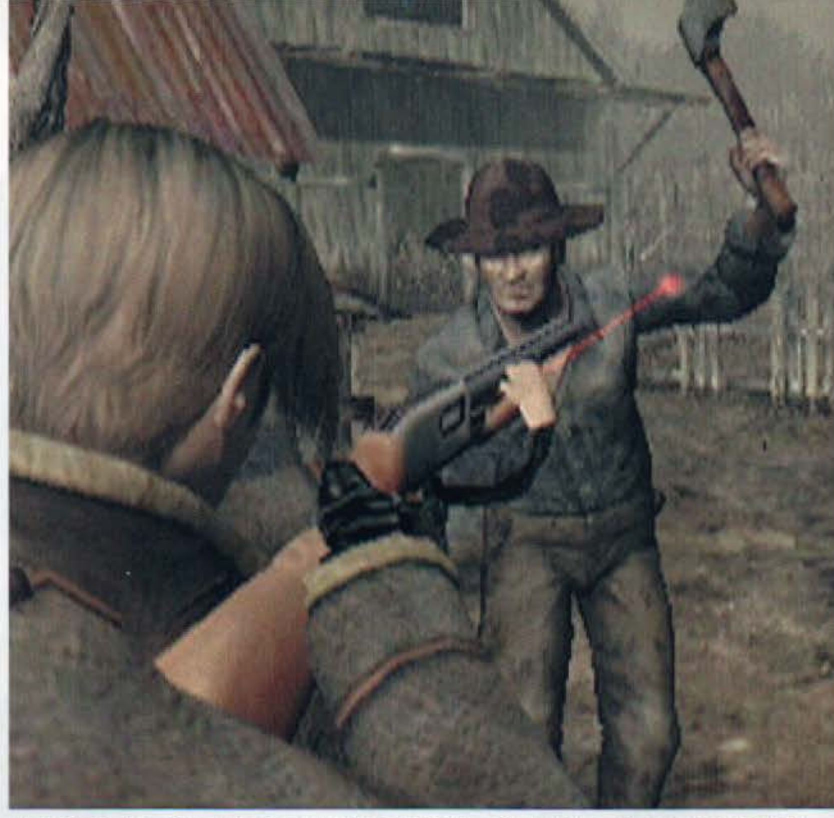
Rifles have dedicated viewpoints (top) – essential when you need to be precise. The entire gameworld is littered with breakable boxes, urns (above) and other receptacles, a simple slash of your knife enough to break them open

Hiroyuki Kobayashi was right: the *Resident Evil* series as it existed was a shuffling, stumbling carcass that needed to be destroyed. In its place we have a fresher specimen, a barnstormer of a game rammed with action, rinsed in blood ejaculated by exploded limbs and delivered with the kind of pace associated with the most accomplished Hollywood blockbusters.

In fact, if videogame makers were still attempting to term their work 'interactive movies', *Resident Evil 4* would wear the label more comfortably than most. Capcom's decision to place the camera over hero Leon Kennedy's shoulder places you closer to the action than you've ever been in a *Resident Evil* title, and the result is a heightened sense of involvement. This is amplified further when you're backed into a corner, and what's bearing down on you threatens to become obscured, and the level of dread and panic is ratcheted up even further.

And, more than the terrifically realised locations, the mesmerising animation of your assailants or the slam-bangery of your arsenal of weapons, it's this relentlessness that is the game's defining characteristic. The action may be broken up into pockets – a particularly intense encounter will often be bracketed by sections in which you can catch your breath as you negotiate a handful of locations unmolested – but you're never more than minutes away from the threat of death once more, a rag-tag bunch of villagers pressing upon you with raised pitchforks and sizzling sticks of dynamite, or an assembly of cloak-shrouded monks lurching down on your location as you stab at reload and hold your breath while Kennedy carefully chugs a fresh batch of ammunition into a thirsty chamber.

Seeing off enemies is what *Resident Evil 4* is all about. The puzzles you encounter are fewer and less obscure than in previous *Evils*, and the more you play the more you appreciate that, at its core, the game is simply a shooting gallery, albeit the most deliciously presented one you've ever seen.



The game's opening sections, set in and around a village populated by unfriendly hicks, muster up an atmosphere that feels freshly macabre. Your keen desire to see what comes next in the following chapters is an old-fashioned feeling



> If videogame makers were still attempting to term their work 'interactive movies', Resident Evil 4 would wear the label more comfortably than most

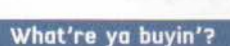
The exotic range of weaponry on offer goes a long way towards making it consistently feel like much more than it is, and the bond that forms between you and your favourite enemy-management tool – be it a semi-automatic rifle, a riot shotgun or something altogether more characterful in appearance and effect – is only strengthened when you begin to power it up with purchases made at the trading posts spread frequently throughout the game. This concept, new to *Resident Evil* but akin to systems already proven by Capcom in the likes of the *Devil May Cry* and *Onimusha* series, introduces strategy as you ponder the relative merits of a pistol with enhanced power or a shotgun with extended ammo capacity – and whether you should in fact be saving up for that big, shiny rocket launcher instead. Along with your limited inventory it adds a pseudo-RPG slant, and doubtless many will feel compelled to play the game through a second time, only differently, to see if it really was worth buying that Killer7 weapon, after all...

And you'll have no trouble reaching the point where playing it through again is an option, because this is not a difficult game.



Holding R draws your weapon, whereupon you manipulate a laser-style sight with the same stick you use for movement, ensuring that in some respects this plays just like previous Resident Evils since you're rooted to the spot when shooting

## What're ya buyin'?





**You'll know that a tasty new encounter isn't far away when you come across a trader. These shadowy types buy and sell anything valuable, paying top dollar (or rather peseta) for shiny trinkets you've found along the way, which you can then spend (along with the other cash you've found) for new weapons, power-ups, health sprays and more besides. Their existence gives *Resident Evil* a new dimension, and before long you'll find yourself obsessing over the state of your arsenal and its ongoing upkeep. A splendid touch.**





Not all of the challenges you face are poised by living beings or puzzles that require a little thought. Tackling an obstacle like this (below), however, requires little in the way of skill









As the game progresses, the story darkens, and your foes become stronger. Meanwhile, target-practice minigames (below) give prizes







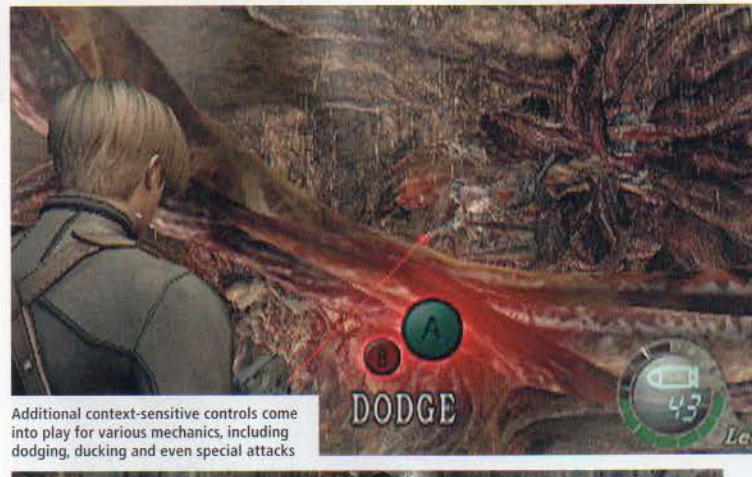

The best-looking game since *Half-Life 2*? Probably. It's all in the detail: heat haze warps your view as molten metal glows sun-orange bright, dust particles drift across cool shafts of moonlight, blood spews from your mangled neck as your head is rasped off your shoulders by a churning chainsaw. The absence of a true 16:9 video option is disappointing, however

Capcom positively encourages your progress, with baddies that aren't nearly as tough as their appearance initially suggests (once you identify and exploit their weak spots, naturally) and a continue system that plops you back at a point just before you messily expired, with no forfeiture whatsoever.

The absence of strafe among your controls means that combat can become, if not more difficult than it might be, then at least more protracted, as you can't neatly circle enemies while picking them off. Instead, you improvise a system whereby you stand and shoot before running a few metres away, then turn 180 degrees to face them once more and begin the process anew. It's not really an issue with grunts, but it does impact on boss encounters. Similarly, Capcom has implemented an aiming system that feels artificially slow, and even with the analogue stick at full lock it takes an age to sweep from an enemy approaching your left side to one just about to stick something big and sharp into the other. Doubtless the control system was pitched this way as a result of extensive playtesting, and the effect certainly serves to keep you constantly on your toes and forever ready with a finger on the trigger.

So, is this what we were expecting from Capcom – a revolution in survival horror? No. Its dialogue is as whiffily cheesy as ever, and its storyline is shot through with holes. It's disappointing, too, to be apparently offered so much freedom right at the very beginning of the game, with its open forest landscapes, only to be firmly ushered along within invisible boundaries. And the scenery around you can be just as illogical as it ever was in prerendered form, leaving you no choice but to constantly push Kennedy up against every object in the vicinity in order to see if this or that particular drawer or cupboard can or cannot be opened and plundered.

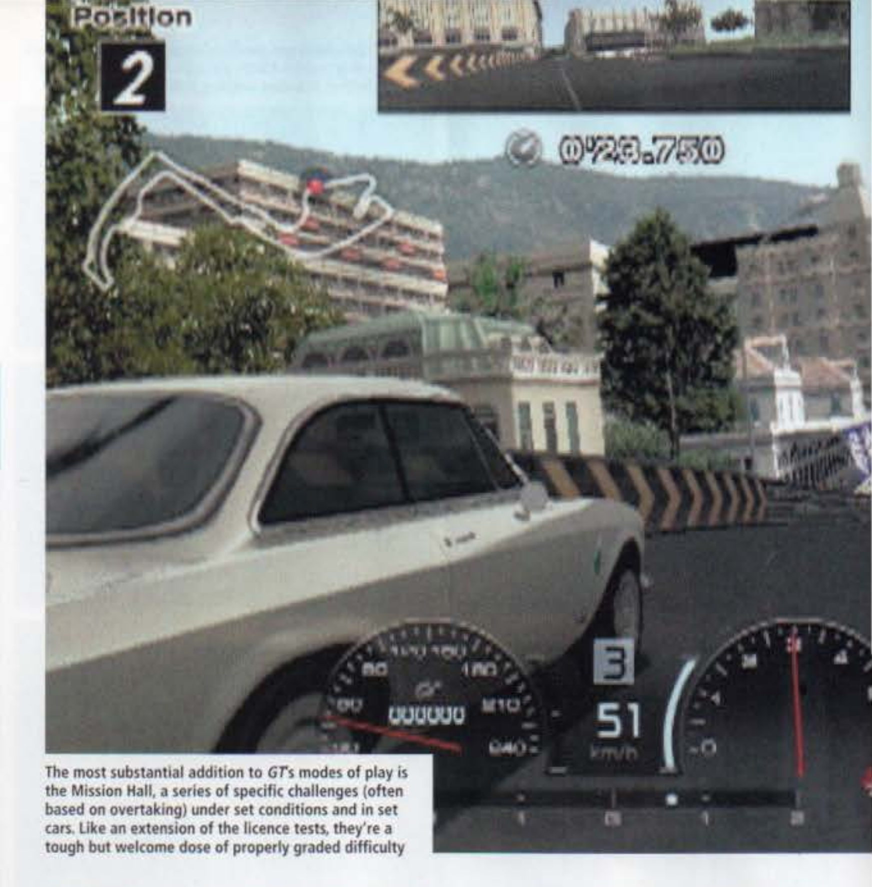
If it is an interactive movie, then, it's an interactive B-movie, but one filled with sights, sounds and thrills that will linger in the memory long after the content of more sophisticated titles has been forgotten. It is so mesmerisingly fraught, so keen to throw things in your face with such frequency, that it can make you feel exhausted after a few hours of consistent play. Exhausted, but with a satisfied smile on your face. **[9]**




Additional context-sensitive controls come into play for various mechanics, including dodging, ducking and even special attacks




Your mission is to rescue president's daughter Ashley – and that obviously means keeping her alive in the face of constant danger. Doing so could've been a chore, but it's expertly integrated into the game's flow


The most substantial addition to *GT*'s modes of play is the Mission Hall, a series of specific challenges (often based on overtaking) under set conditions and in set cars. Like an extension of the licence tests, they're a tough but welcome dose of properly graded difficulty



## GRAN TURISMO 4

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), MAR 11 (UK) PUBLISHER: SCEI
DEVELOPER: POLYPHONY PREVIOUSLY IN: E125, E131, E138, E143





In a wry acknowledgement of their reputation as hard work, the licence tests now include 'coffee breaks' – games that ask you to negotiate a forest of cones, or knock down a spiral of them. They're a fun holiday from cornering school, and evidence of the humour many (wrongly) believe the series lacks

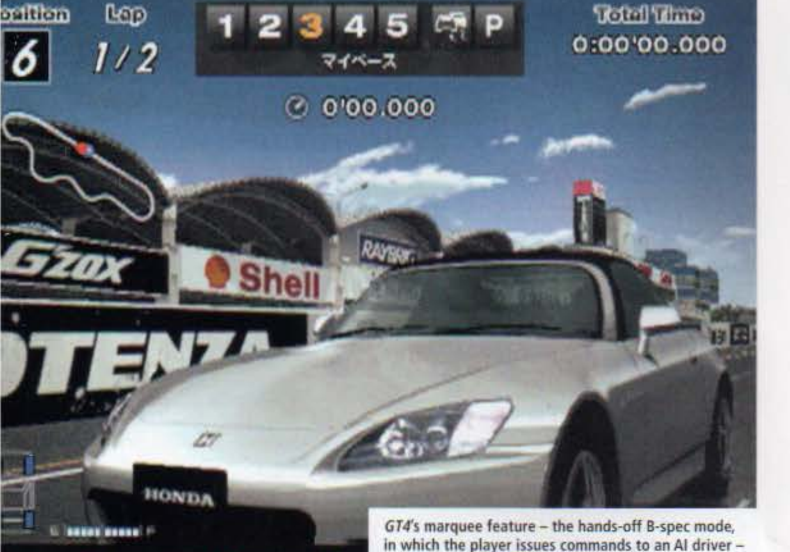
Do these words mean anything to you? E-type. Wankel. Integrale. Suzuka. Rascasse. Mille Miglia. If they don't, you can probably skip the rest of this review, because even if you love videogames, *Gran Turismo 4* will most likely leave you cold. If, however, they stir the oil that runs thick in your veins and inspire lofty thoughts of automobile history and the glamour and daring of motorsport... well, you too can probably skip the rest of this review, because *Gran Turismo 4*'s lavish hymn to the motor car will most likely consume you, irrespective of its shortcomings as a videogame. And it has to be said that those shortcomings are serious, and they are old.

Not all of them are of Polyphony Digital's own making. *GT4* is poorly served by the DualShock2. Steering is a little twitchy, and neither the right stick nor the analogue face buttons provide as sensitive, ergonomic and intuitive a control system for throttle and brake as a pair of triggers with decent travel. Balancing the car on the throttle, gently feeding the power through a bend is possible with practice, but desperately lacking in feel or precision. They're adequate controls, but in a game whose very raison d'être is car control, adequate is nowhere near enough. Those willing to invest in a force-feedback wheel, however, will be richly rewarded.

Then there's the curse of the 'real driving simulator' genre that *Gran Turismo* invented, a conundrum created by its tuning element: how can you produce a rewarding and progressive challenge in a racing game where players can simply buy speed? Often, races in *GT4* – the random battles in its motoring RPG – can either be won with ease by the third corner, or not at all. Fail, and you'll have you'll expose another yet another old flaw: damage or no damage (and, once again, there is none), impact physics that fail to convince or punish ought to be a thing of the past. In *Gran Turismo*'s fossilised design, already hopelessly encumbered by its own tradition, they're not.

It's baffling that more hasn't been done to address these problems – especially given the delay to the online mode that will render most of them moot – and it's also baffling that they don't really matter. Polyphony head Kazunori Yamauchi's stated intention is not to produce the ultimate videogame about

> Alongside every current production car you can think of you'll find a scholarly selection stretching through '80s wild children to the Model T Ford


*GT4*'s marquee feature – the hands-off B-spec mode, in which the player issues commands to an AI driver – is useful for clearing the mammoth endurance races, or for when fatigue, frustration or thirst kick in – but, with its limited feature set it has next to no depth

to exercise supernatural restraint and prescience when shopping for new parts if you don't want to annihilate the competition on your second go. Chasing a close, exciting race almost becomes its own game, but it's one you'll have to design the rules for, blind, yourself. It's a balancing nightmare, and it's debatable whether it's soluble at all, but some token compromise – tighter horsepower restrictions, say – ought to have been reached by now.

There's another, closely related culprit in *GT4*'s unfulfilling sport, though, and this time Polyphony has no excuse: the bovine AI. Truly lifelike CPU drivers in videogames are still some way off, but by now the vast majority display more aggression, competitive spirit and general awareness of their surroundings than these meek cattle. Bump into them and driving, but the ultimate real-world driving experience on videogame hardware, and in this respect *GT4* eclipses its predecessors and its competition with some ease. The handling model can seem dry after *Project Gotham Racing 2*'s tactile, tyre-smoking exuberance, but the feedback and physical detail are unsurpassed, the satisfaction in smoothly nailing an apex immense.

And then there is that overwhelming pantheon of cars, 700 strong. Alongside every current production car you can think of you'll find a scholarly selection stretching back through '80s wild children, '70s cult favourites and '60s glamour pusses to the Model T Ford and, incredibly, the 1904 Daimler-Benz Motor Carriage – as well as forward to progressive hybrids and fanciful far-future concepts. Crushingly, many cannot













## Formula Two



Though not the most protracted of transitions, *Gran Turismo*'s move to Europe looks set to reward the PAL community for its patience. Extras have been worked into the feature list and presentation, some of which promise genuine improvement. With regional flavour coming courtesy of additional music and a recut intro, other expected adjustments include 12 new cars, more efficient navigation and various artistic tweaks. What may surprise are substantial changes such as the abilities to shift from A-Spec to B-Spec during pitstops and to import progress data from *GT4: Prologue*. Kudos, then, for an upgrade package that complements the original without inflicting any unwelcome change.



Driving on dirt, gravel, and especially snow is a wild and precarious ride with this new handling model. Perhaps that's realism, but the meaty accessibility of the rallying in earlier *GT*s was more enjoyable. These events still boast the greatest application of pad rumble in any game to date, though



The scenery is seldom less than spectacular, but compared to the best on other platforms the cars, road surfaces and trackside furniture sport a slightly artificial, plastic sheen. As beautifully tailored and finished as *GT4* is, the PS2's underthings are starting to show

be raced (probably due to an excess of polygons in open models), but all can be gazed at in their exquisitely rendered glory, coveted, and compulsively collected. And all of them can be driven, in a very close approximation of the real experience. It's an obsessive, academic achievement of biblical proportions: no less than an interactive study of the whole history of motoring.

The same philosophy applies to *GT4*'s library of tarmac. The majority of the original tracks here have been familiar for seven years now, and (excepting a few thrillingly evocative tarmac rally stages) more effort has gone into transcribing real-world circuits than crafting virtual ones. It's a mouthwatering roster: the mighty Nürburgring, somehow lacking the sweeping grandeur of its *PGR2* incarnation, but with a more claustrophobic, scary, and viciously bumpy ride; the snaking bends of Suzuka's breathless figure-of-eight; and, albeit under assumed names, powerfully atmospheric renditions of the most romantic venues in motorsport, Monaco and Le Mans. It's a privilege to have free run of these legends, but if course design is the heart and soul of the racing game, it's a shame to find Polyphony still so reluctant to contribute to the canon, seemingly more interested in humbly and painstakingly tracing the work of others.

There it is: *Gran Turismo 4* is fundamentally unconcerned with furthering the art of the videogame. This titanic franchise, this critical, load-bearing pillar of the house of PlayStation, is barely even a videogame at all. It's a hobbyist software suite, a racetrack tutorial, an encyclopaedia you can get in and drive off. Perhaps that makes it a fitting flagship for the company that coined the evasive term 'computer entertainment'; but however you look at it, it's a labour of great love and erudition, and indispensable to those who care. **[7]**



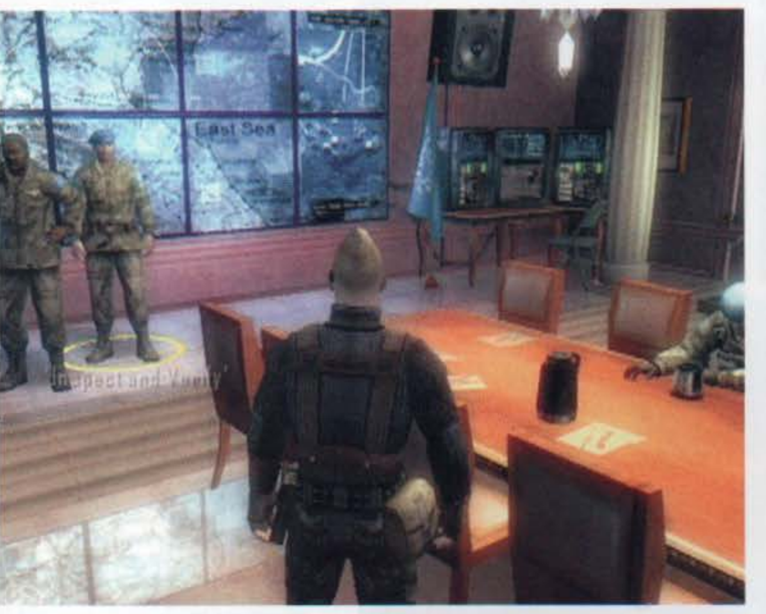
*GT4*'s autophilia reaches its height in the gloriously pointless, rhapsodic Photo Travel mode. Pose and photograph your collection in glamorous global locations, and then study those sensuous lines in high-res printouts



# MERCENARIES

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: PANDEMIC PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E141



This is Activision's second attempt at *GTA*, and it's equally as charming and as flawed as its first. *True Crime* was problematic, its engaging voice acting, plotting, characterisation and manifold game styles undermined by technical inadequacies. *Mercenaries* flips over the coin, delivering an incredibly solid universe with barely a technical glitch to be found, but it's soulless and almost bereft of plot or character. This is a sandbox game begging for a purpose.

*Mercenaries* is supported by a flimsy structure that never engages. Set in a North Korea wracked by internal conflict you must collect the bounties on 52 members of a militaristic regime. Dodgy politics aside, these individuals (represented by playing cards) have no real status or impact in the world. Get close to one of their locations and an icon appears on the map; you must then apprehend them, either by verifying the body or bundling them into an allied helicopter for capture. Double the bounty is paid for bringing 'cards' in alive.

In between collecting bounties, missions can be accepted from several factions also vying for control over this war-torn country. These missions add some substance and context to the death and destruction, but it's superficial. The relationships between each faction, and your allegiance to any one of them, are hollow, adding to the game's lack of drive. The fudging becomes obvious when you realise you can simply bribe back factions into your favour with a relatively small amount of cash. If the purpose of the game is to show the purposelessness of life as a contract soldier, then it's certainly succeeded.

The contrast between this and the *GTA* series is most apparent in the boredom felt while driving/flying around. Liberty City, Vice City and the towns in San Andreas soon become familiar friends, street corners, malls and public parks as vivid in your memory as a favourite holiday destination. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the maps in *Mercenaries* are barren, embattled places devoid of interesting landmarks or locations bar a couple of impressive fortresses. There are two maps, South and North, and while the second is much more stimulating it's disappointing to find they are linked only by a sentry at a tent with a 'do you want to go to…' command. The first two hours of the game feel incredibly pedestrian, though matters improve when the difficulty ramps up.

*Mercenaries* does redeem itself by letting you play (or more to the point, cause havoc) in a world full of amusingly clockwork soldiers and destructible features. The game's physics are a pleasure to challenge. The *Mercenaries* world proves to be incredibly robust, an enormous achievement given the scope of the game and the number of toys there are to play with. While the PS2 version is a little flimsier, not to mention uglier, it's all bolted together with an engine that's reliable and streamed from memory with expertise. Experimentation can be delightful, and even if you try something outlandish you can be confident it won't result in your hero tumbling through the landscape or floating through scenery. Weapons, especially the RPG, have weight and impact – and there's a delight in entering enemy compounds merely to cause maximum carnage.

Similarly, vehicles are empowering and have real presence, and as you accumulate



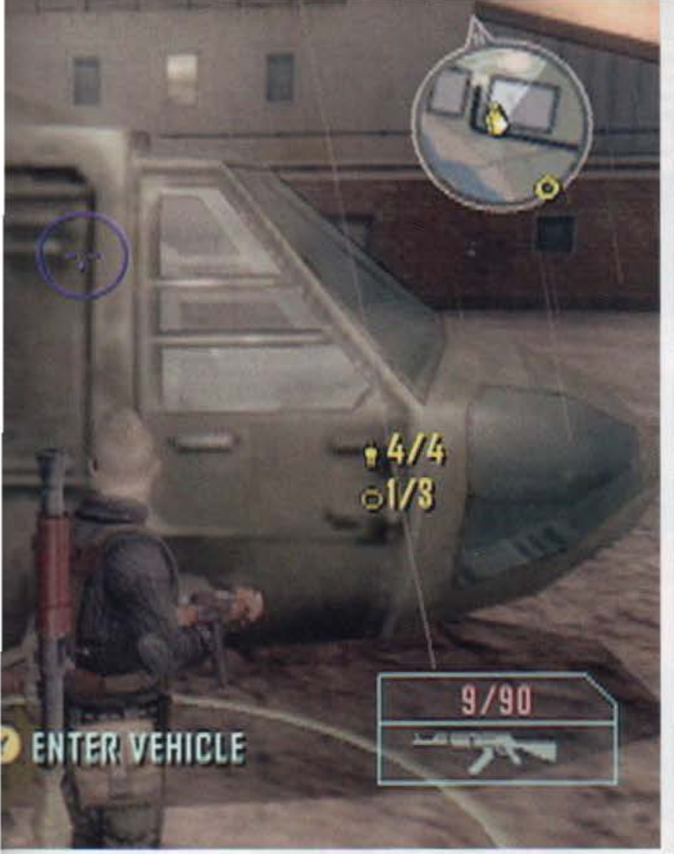
The Mercenaries world proves to be incredibly robust, an enormous achievement given the scope of the game and the number of toys to play with





Missions are briefly outlined at HQ, but there's never a sense of an overarching narrative driving the experience. Most of the vital information is found on the map











Enemy gunners must be killed before you can commandeer a vehicle. Transport can offer a safety margin if your health is low, as units start out with 100 hit points




There's a simple pleasure in watching objects explode, but enemies often feel insignificant; it's only when using tanks or RPGs that they become menacing

new support features the number of methods for completing goals increases exponentially. The hit-hard-and-fast rule works in most situations, but watching giant structures collapse and crumble under shelling rarely gets tiresome. What the game lacks in narrative it makes up for with the pure and simple pleasure of breaking things.

Yet the game can feel brutally unfair in the later epic stages largely because one hit from a grenade, tank shell or RPG round knocks your character's health down to one point. This gives you some grace to heal yourself back up, but medipacks can be difficult to locate, leaving you to risk throwing a flare on to open ground to signal for a supply drop. Waiting for these crates while bullets and shells are raining in can be excruciating. A quicker heal option would have been preferable, especially in missions that can take up to half an hour to complete; one more hit in this vulnerable state and it's back to the MASH tent to start all over again.

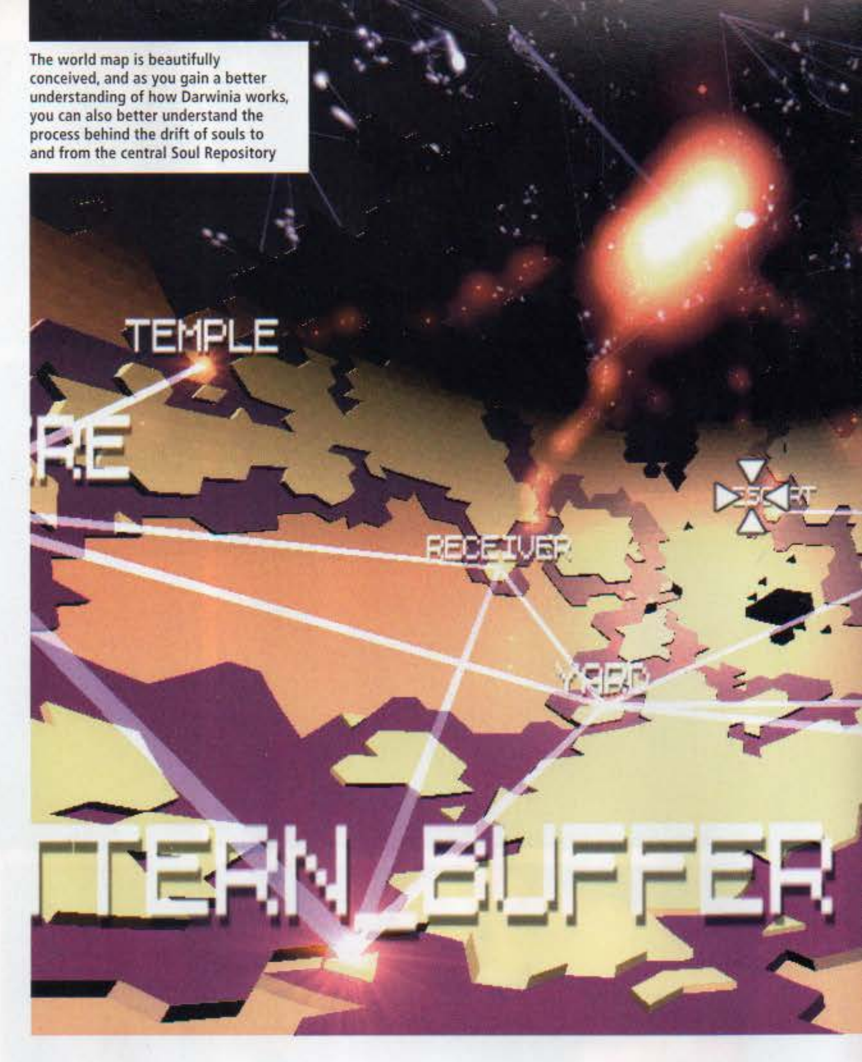
*Mercenaries* has some excellent bonuses and unlockables, and paces out the rewards judiciously, but the lack of a substantial plot and a compelling reason to destroy yet more things gives it a hollow feel. With a good scriptwriter and a mission designer with more imagination this could have been something monumental. In other words, *Mercenaries* is a brilliant sequel waiting to happen. **[7]**

The three mercenaries you can choose from differ only marginally, and once you've caught all 52 cards it's unlikely you'll have a taste for more. Get down to one hit point and your health recovers very slowly back up to 20

## Get in the back of the van!



**The weakest missions are those that require the ferrying of journalists and weapons inspectors (or as Swedish mercenary Mattias Nilsson calls them, 'pains in the ass') to locations in order to complete tasks while you protect them from hostile fire. Enemy AI is consistently aggressive and therefore believable in the context of this mercenary world, but ally AI is excruciatingly dense. When bullets are flying around they run around in circles, but even when all threats are eliminated they can panic and run for cover. Tooting a vehicle's horn is supposed to encourage them climb inside, but sometimes they stubbornly refuse to comply even if seats are available. Annoying.**




The world map is beautifully conceived, and as you gain a better understanding of how Darwinia works, you can also better understand the process behind the drift of souls to and from the central Soul Repository

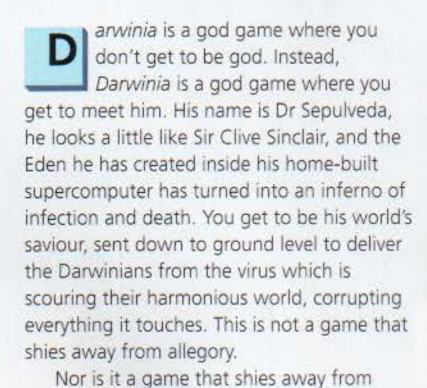


## DARWINIA

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: MARCH 4
PUBLISHER: INTROVERSION DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E142



As you play, Dr Sepulveda continues his research, and among the results are these battle tanks. Once full of Darwinians, they can cross land and sea rapidly and can be converted into gun emplacements at their destination – presuming your Darwinian passengers can stay alive long enough to man them



*Darwinia* is a god game where you don't get to be god. Instead, *Darwinia* is a god game where you get to meet him. His name is Dr Sepulveda, he looks a little like Sir Clive Sinclair, and the Eden he has created inside his home-built supercomputer has turned into an inferno of infection and death. You get to be his world's saviour, sent down to ground level to deliver the Darwinians from the virus which is scouring their harmonious world, corrupting everything it touches. This is not a game that shies away from allegory.

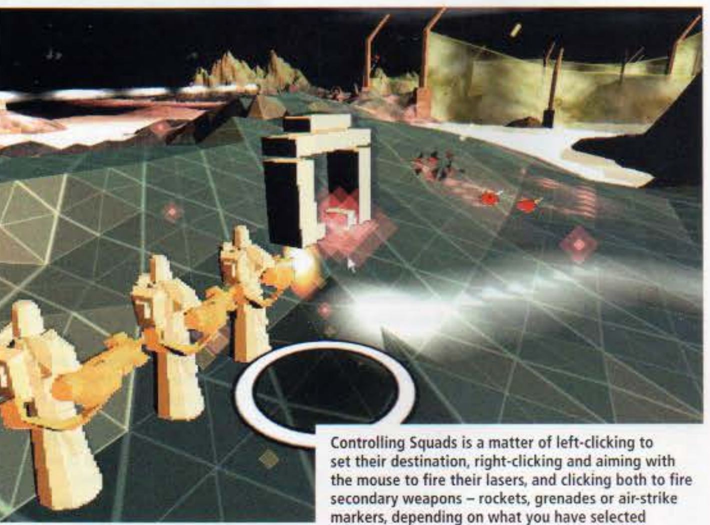
Nor is it a game that shies away from tradition. At its heart, *Darwinia* is a very simple realtime strategy game – so simple, indeed, that even 'strategy' is rather overstating the case. Your task is to eradicate the virus, and to restore the natural balance and mechanisms of *Darwinia*'s virtual ecology, and your means are very straightforward. By creating a handful of units – Squads to take out the virii, Engineers to capture control towers and activate Darwinia's machines – you mount a brute-force attack. Clear enough space, and you can begin propagating Darwinians, using Engineers to gather up the energy left behind by destroyed virii and return it to the incubators you have recaptured. The Darwinians drift defencelessly through the land, so you need to appoint Officers – controllable Darwinians that act as mobile signposts – to herd your population to where you need them. Direct them to one of Darwinia's vast machines, and they'll start work. Repeat this process across all of the world's locations and gradually Darwinia comes back online and balance is restored.



There's not much more to it than that, although an upgrade system gradually reveals that the Darwinians aren't quite as helpless as they seem. This allows the game to ramp up the challenge, forcing you to shore up defences against counter attacks, and producing gruelling beach landings which would be as bloody and brutal as anything *Medal Of Honor* has come up with, but for the fact that the world is constructed purely out of squares of hazy luminescence. But while the challenge intensifies, the game doesn't blossom in complexity, and there's no reason why it should. This isn't a god game, or an epic RTS. Squads are almost entirely useless unless you're in active control of them, and this factor drags your perspective down from god-view to Darwinian view. Commanding their progress and directing their fire is a simple task, but there's no discounting the drama of the explosive battles which rage around them, and there's no doubting the satisfaction of grimly, gradually hosing the infection off *Darwinia*'s polygon-perfect shores. Even Mario's cleaning duties in Delfino Plaza don't match the relief of skewering virus after virus with a shard of laser fire, and watching them vaporise into screeching, shrieking smoke. And it's this that is at the heart of *Darwinia*. Termed a 'digital dreamscape' by its creators, this was never intended to rewrite the RTS rulebook. What it does is create is an unforgettable world, and locates within it a story which is as compelling as it is simple. By casting you as the protector of this dazzling world, built out of nothing more than geometry and light, it ties you into the game until you know you've eradicated the last trace of the virus. The compulsion to annihilate is born substantially out of the truly excellent soundscape, the sickeningly fizzy slither of the infection threatening to



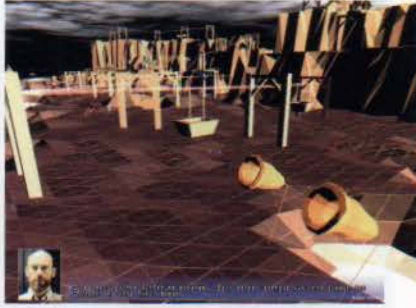
Even Mario's cleaning duties in Delfino Plaza don't match the relief of skewering virus after virus with laser fire, and watching them vaporise



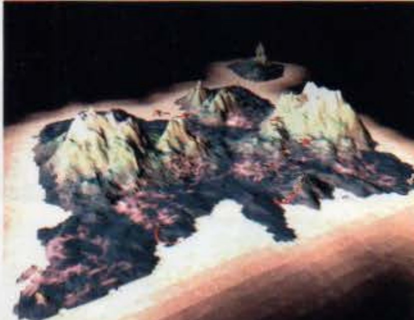
Controlling Squads is a matter of left-clicking to set their destination, right-clicking and aiming with the mouse to fire their lasers, and clicking both to fire secondary weapons – rockets, grenades or air-strike markers, depending on what you have selected

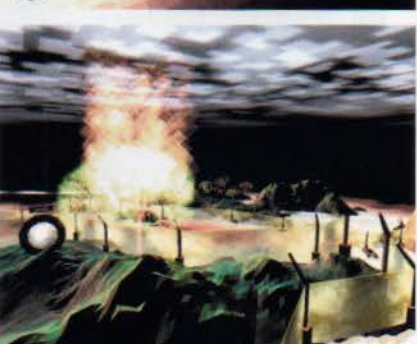




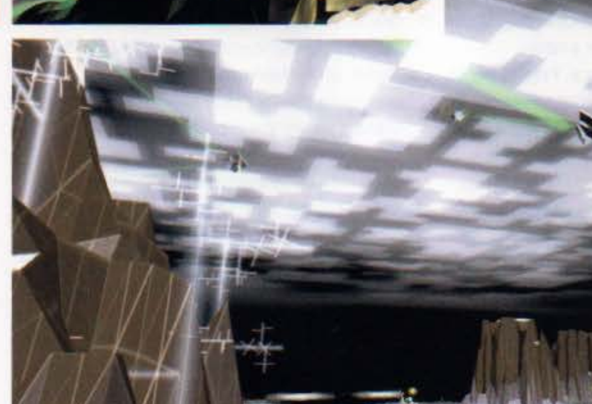
What tactical weight the game does have comes from enemies like these egg-spawners. Unless destroyed, these flowers spit eggs all over the level, which hatch into spiders and swarms of virii. Destroy these early, or battles can rage endlessly







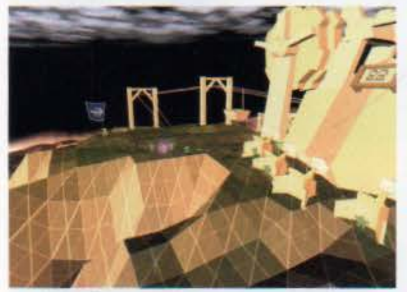

Squads can only be created close to control towers you've captured. Once created, it becomes a mobile spawn point, letting you create engineers from wherever on the map they exist. There's no penalty for losing a squad – it simply creates an empty slot you can fill by creating another



drown out the anxious mewls of the Darwinians. And as a result, 'dreamscape' comes closer to the mark than you might think. Rarely has a game shown such an ability to haunt you as you sleep, herds of desperate Darwinians tattooed on the inside of your eyelids.

But if these are the game's triumphs, then they come at a price. The tactical simplicity may tie you to the action, but it means the game can become repetitive. Although each level has a distinct and different goal, your means of achieving it is built out of the same few building blocks every time. Even when the game unleashes its biggest surprise, the core gameplay pattern is only incrementally expanded. The control scheme, with its cute reliance on Windows key combos Alt-Tab and Ctrl-C, is also a little clumsy. Units are created by mouse gestures, which when they work are fluid and elegant. And work they usually do – the recognition system is certainly generous – but when they let you down in the heat of battle it's almost impossible to forgive. Similarly frustrating is the frame-rate drop which can occur when the game starts to fulfil its promise of battlefields rippling with hundreds of Darwinians.

Perhaps the most illustrative thing about *Darwinia* is that its basic currency is souls. While there's no traditional resource management in the game, there's a vast economy of souls, with each Darwinian's lifeforce being endless recycled, circling from the splintered beauty of the fractal trees below to the warming light of the heavenly Soul Repository above. Where most games are built out of wood, bullets and money, *Darwinia* has an unapologetically spiritual vision, its geeky god presiding over a world which dares to make an imagined religion into a ruleset. That in some places it falls short of its ambitions is not what makes this game important. **[7]**



Darwinian Officers send a glowing trace along the landscape to guide lesser Darwinians to their obstacle. Once they find a machine – like this polygon refinery – they'll automatically take their place at its controls

## Would you Adam and Eve it?



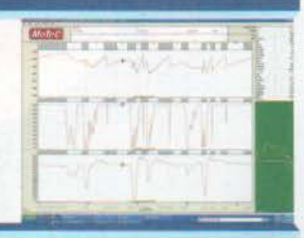
**It's a little early in Introversion's career to be pattern-spotting, but *Darwinia* and previous hacker-sim *Uplink* share the same clever premise: the game that you're playing is actually taking place inside the machine you're playing it on. In *Uplink* the transparency is total, in *Darwinia* it's a little more fudged. If the Squads are programmes which can be closed with a tap of Ctrl-C, why are they opened with a complex mouse gesture instead of double-clicking a convenient icon? And although the plot does an elegant job of translating the biblical creation story onto Dr Sepulveda's servers, the astonishing and vibrant world he creates is too far removed from our humdrum conception of computers to be a truly convincing conceit.**



# GTR

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 25
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: SIMBIN
PREVIOUSLY IN: E146

## Data entry



**If you're interested in the pit experience, *GTR* provides all the tools you could need to optimise your race and ride. All the telemetry gathered from the simulation is continually logged and recorded in data files, which can the be opened and read in the MoTeC Interpreter, a pro-level vehicle analyst tool, to be pored over onscreen or printed out and analysed at the player's leisure. The level of detail is astonishing, down to the temperature of the front and rear suspension elements.**

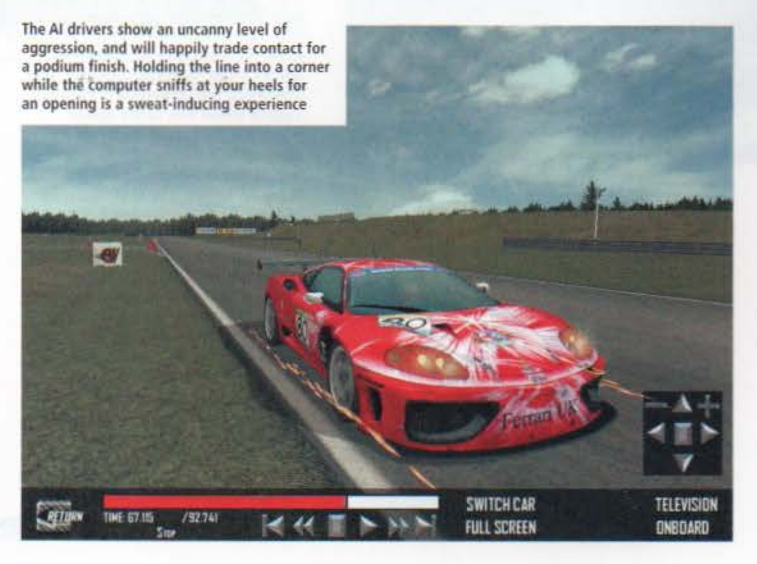
It takes a special type of obsession to create a simulator like *GTR*, and a similar frame of mind to enjoy it. It bears little resemblance to the facile driving games that fill the shelves of game shops. This is a piece of software that models not only the mechanics of the car but also the friction between tarmac and wheel and that calculates the changing balance of the car as the fuel sloshes in the tank. At its core is a dynamics model that reports back to the simulation 400 times every second, tracking the most minute of changes in aerodynamics and balance. Expect no compromises.

But be very surprised when you discover they're included as standard. Catering for gamers bred on the limited challenges of *Gran Turismo*'s marathon licence tests, *GTR*'s series of arcade options offer a near-complete GT racing experience. Players begin as a Sunday driver with cars that select an appropriate gear for corners and even apply the brakes when your approach vector is a little off-key. Yet somehow, you will still find yourself checking out Monza's gravel pit, spinning backwards into the tyre walls. Take a deep breath. Relax. Maybe turn on the steering aid and concentrate solely on working the accelerator and clutch.

Winning races won't be an option, not yet. Corners need to be learned, entire tracks committed to memory. You need to head back to first principles, learning how to drive the car before you can even consider racing it. Understand when to put the foot down, and when not to. Realise that slamming the foot on the accelerator as you scream out of the pits is just going to scorch doughnuts into the tarmac. So set your sights lower. To complete a lap without falling off the side. To push yourself that little bit further on, that bit faster. You grow to know the course. So, you run through a race weekend – start with the practice sessions. Set your own targets, then surpass them. Come in from qualifying third from last, and feel proud. Run the formation lap, then, as the flag drops, time your gear change and acceleration perfectly. Don't flip out at the first corner. Try harder. Your eventual success is nothing short of exhilarating.

But this could have been even *better*. While the cars are exquisitely polished, tracks suffer from a lack of detail. Not in the terrain, or accuracy, just the externals. Textures are ropey, and extraneous objects lack detail, while the messy frontend makes defining your perfect set-up more work than it needs to be. The lack of a tutorial is a mistake: just playing *GTR* makes you want to be good at it. There's no need to punish players for a lack of specialist knowledge.

Yet this is an incredible achievement, the closest a simulator has come to entertainment; the nearest videogaming has come to the real experience of driving. Forget play. Just drive. **[8]**




**The AI drivers show an uncanny level of aggression, and will happily trade contact for a podium finish. Holding the line into a corner while the computer sniffs at your heels for an opening is a sweat-inducing experience**








***GTR*'s mod support is as extensive as it is accomplished. The project began as a homebrew piece of software, and SimBin is keen to support the amateur developers. Since *GTR*'s original German release, new tracks and cars have been added to the game's repertoire**




**Changing race conditions add a troublesome frisson to long-weekend championships. Storms in qualifying will not clear for the race, necessitating a trip back to the garage, a change in tyres, and a rethink in tactics**








Normal questioning techniques (main) aren't a match for the Special Interrogation points scattered throughout levels which make inventive use of the surroundings (above right)



# THE PUNISHER

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: APRIL PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: VOLITION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E144

There's a fine line between prejudice and experience. Take The Punisher and Volition. Experience would suggest the marriage between a game based on Marvel's grittiest (though by no means most engaging) creation and the restricted development window necessary to bring it to market to coincide with the recent cinematic release would, inevitably, produce a rather familiar, predictable offspring of limited ability. One look at Volition's genealogy and prejudice would undoubtedly come to the same conclusion.

Both are right, sadly. The nature of the licence – a vigilante who makes it his life's work to brutally dispose of criminal scum following his family's accidental massacre by the mob – would provide an easy excuse to jettison all attempts at creativity. In fairness, Volition has tried to stand out from the usual line-up of dumb gun fun, but is ultimately unsuccessful.

*The Punisher* plays out as a series of flashbacks, with the ex-marine in custody following a crime-fighting spree which has substantially depleted the city's bodybag stock. Naturally, you get to relive this bloody binge, and as you're waltzing through the game's 16 chapters (dual-)wielding increasingly powerful weaponry, it's obvious that other games have done thirdperson shooting far more convincingly: control feels overly mechanical, disappointingly clunky, and lacks the necessary refinement and finesse; enemy behaviour is not only predictable but displays a significant absence of intelligence; environment interaction is inconsistent and limited; while the camera struggles to effectively frame the action in confined spaces.

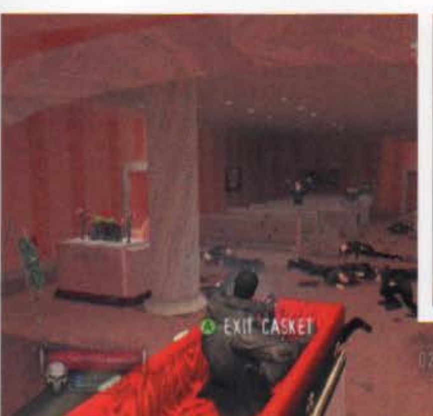
Not one to come off worse from scuffling with the genre's core components, *The Punisher* does at least get back up, dust itself off and plough on regardless. Its resilience is repaid in the odd standout moment and partially through the game's individual touches. For instance, the ability to 'interrogate' enemies by subjecting them to physical punishment until their silence breaks (by maintaining the torture level within a set limit for three seconds) is novel. However, with only four methods of questioning available this soon loses its attraction (it remains useful for topping up the health gauge), although there are numerous Special Interrogation spots, which use the game's varied environments to provide gruesome opportunities for diverse executions (involving, say, a sash window, a piano or a car door). Adding to the inventive and grisly disposal of opponents is the Quick Kill button – ranging from rifle-butt blows to a knife through the skull – which although tiresomely repetitive is nevertheless an elegant and economical solution for dealing with a nearby foe. For multiple-adversary encounters you can always resort to Slaughter mode, *The Punisher*'s version of bullet-time, which at least throws a little strategic flexibility into the mix.

But it's not enough. Eventually, once you've wiped away the layer of gore, you're left with an experience that, expectedly, offers limited entertainment. **[5]**





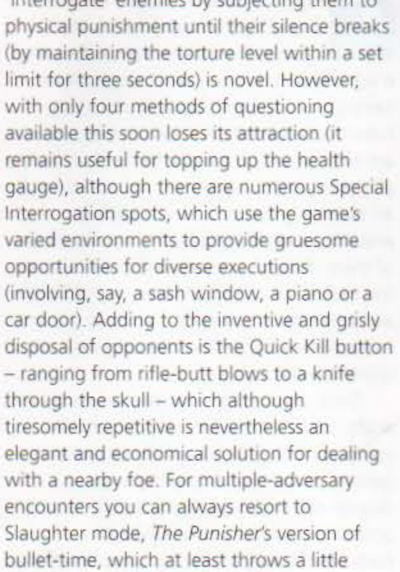

Usually, barging into a room and picking off opponents in sequence results in little health loss (above). This isn't tactical shooter territory, but the ability to use bodies as shields, Slaughter mode and energy boosts make it all a bit easy. Enemies worth interrogating are helpfully marked out with a skull above their head. Marvelette Black Widow makes an appearance and proves a decent ally (left)






Two of the game's (rare) standout moments: slaughtering a roomful of henchmen from a coffin (right); and, while heavily scripted, the encounter with The Russian (above) makes a welcome change from stale boss fights

## Punish and reward



**The Punisher implements a multiplier-based scoring system to encourage swift yet careful justice (ie, get hit and you lose the multiplier). At the end of a level, points mean prizes in the form of medals, the option to enhance the vigilante's abilities (body armour, longer Slaughter mode, increased accuracy, etc), and the usual raft of bonuses (comic covers, concept art, movies, trailers, cheats...). Completing a stage also opens up a Challenge mode, which, as its name suggests, requires you to return to the level with the aim of meeting a particular requirement. Decent additions, but they don't rescue the overall package from mediocrity.**


Hijacking a Walker is one of the game's standout moments, allowing the player to see the world through a literal red mist and wreak careless destruction from a remote location






Enemies are reminiscent of *Killzone*'s Helghast troop – all heavy armour and intimidating headwear – but are just as commonplace, to the point that they don't feel intimidating. Bots, however, are a more worrying sight



Your augmentations soak up a sizeable chunk of bio-energy with each use, making them feel a little too prohibitive in practice. Infrared and time-slowing modifications can be used for a more forgiving length of time than the ultra-expensive invisibility



## PROJECT: SNOWBLIND

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: MARCH 4 PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E142, E145

### Kinetic cut



***Snowblind* has its own lightweight answer to *Half-Life 2*'s Gravity Gun – the Kinetic Kicker. It can reel objects in toward the player and fling them away, as well as deliver a sharp little jab of energy to enemies. But, like most of *Snowblind*'s fancier ideas, it's easy to forget that it's actually there. Very few objects can be interacted with, and the sensation of wielding it is nowhere near as snappy and omnipotent as *HL2*'s physics gun. It can be used to solve the occasional simple puzzle – such as using a box to activate tripwires from a safe distance – but remains an underplayed feature.**

*Project: Snowblind* began life as a *Deus Ex* deathmatch game. And, despite the finished article featuring a significant, narrative-driven singleplayer campaign as its centrepiece, it ultimately hasn't escaped that description. Body counts are way up, and the scope for wildly differing play strategies is way down: it's not so much an expansion of Ion Storm's muddled, ambitious, augmented worlds as a restriction of them. Players have been allowed to keep the tools of the *Deus Ex* trade – bionic talents and a handful of gadgets – but they get lost in the noise of a game centred on copious, combat-heavy battles.

There are strategies, of course. Ventilation shafts are your strongest stealth card, but trying to creep around confrontations in general isn't really an attainable option; despite an invisibility augmentation, its only potent use is to escape or sidestep particularly heavy battles for some breathing space. Gun turrets and bots can be hijacked via an ice pick tool but, again, their use is just to provide you with some free kills before having to enter the fray yourself. It means that these elements feel tacked on, but their simplicity makes their use all the more straightforward and immediate as accompaniments to rampant gunplay.

As a *Deus Ex* game, it's limp and uninteresting. But taken as a more generic firstperson shooter, it's an engaging, if perhaps too brief, experience. Set-pieces are short but sweet and tight, offer a good sense of chaos and occur in punchy enough bursts to keep the player's weapons warm. Secondary firing modes are almost always useful, and thrown weapons – grenades, spiderbots, bulletproof riot walls – are ingeniously handled, with one button press to throw and a second to detonate at will, satisfyingly removing the need to guess at a trajectory.


*Snowblind* is a surprisingly pretty game, especially for a PS2 shooter, and few locations aren't bathed in a shimmering glow of some striking lighting. Little variety in the enemy types is the game's weakest visual aspect

Levels are strewn with medikits and other pick-ups, which may seem like generosity towards the player, but feels like outdated compensation for the game's refusal to borrow *Halo*'s recharging system. Having to scour the levels for a life-saving bite of health is a definite pace-breaker; similarly, a recharging bio-energy meter would have led to far more experimentation with augmentations, even if the game's situations don't strongly encourage it.

Ultimately, *Snowblind* is among the best firstperson shooters available on PS2 – even down to providing a smooth aiming system on the DualShock sticks – but considering the current exalted standards of the rest of the FPS landscape, that's nearly damning it with faint praise. While *Snowblind* never truly escapes the feeling of being a well-dressed, derivative run'n'gun shooter, it never fails to get the running and gunning right, and in that respect, at least, it's a sound success. **[7]**

Rain leaves the settlements shrouded in mist, and actually makes visibility somewhat reduced. Cold weather will freeze rivers and lakes, making alternate attack routes possible

# THE SETTLERS: HERITAGE OF KINGS

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: BLUE BYTE

*The Settlers* series has long gone about its business in one of the quieter provinces of PC gaming. It's a densely populated but fairly uneventful part of the world, and it's been host to cute and comfortable realtime resource management for many years now. Setting up uncomplicated economies and trundling along in competition with other settlements has become a regular and soul-soothing experience. But times have changed, and life in this sleepy kingdom has been subject to some serious upheavals.

This time out, *Settlers* has tried to grow up a little. Gone are the squat and rotund stylings of the previous games: *Heritage Of Kings* offers a new, slightly more mature medievalism. The game still shimmers with pastoral charm, but this rural idyll is now under threat, if only from a rather disorganised new combat system. The settlers in *Heritage Of Kings* no longer depend entirely upon their construction talents to keep you engaged – there's now a pantheon of hero characters who can explore the map, talk to NPCs and pursue the ends of a weak, workaday narrative.

Storytelling isn't one of the strengths of *Heritage Of Kings*, and the new heroes don't exactly lend gravitas to the quest to defeat the Black Knight. If there's any real engagement to be found in the game it is *still* in the resource management and settlement construction. The size of the maps and the sheer wealth of resources mean that you're rapidly able to build huge settlements and amass incredible amounts of money, metal, stone, clay, wood and the buildings



**If attacked, buildings will burst into flame. Serfs must be ordered off other tasks to repair them as soon as possible. Each functional building can be upgraded as new technologies arrive, and delightful animations augment each one as it grows**

upon which victory depends. And, for the most part, it's a victory that is easily assured. Maintaining a garrison to swat incoming enemies is your only real concern, and the AI is too wobbly to render tactical combat a possibility, let alone seriously endanger your settlement. If you have more men, or decent heroes, then the battle is won. It's as simple as that.

While *Heritage Of Kings* has taken the series in a new direction without completely uprooting itself from the settlement-crafting past, it's not been a successful evolution. Even the most lethargic and undemanding of gamers will quickly become bored of the gambolling wildlife and labouring peasants. With games such as *Age Of Mythology* and *Warcraft III* offering tight challenges, precocious tech-trees and polished presentation, *Heritage Of Kings* has only the weakest of foundations to build upon. However well-meant its intentions, the game has stumbled into an arena in which it cannot compete. It's going to come away with a bloody nose and, hopefully, a quick trip back to the drawing board. **[5]**



**A hole in the ground has never been quite as important as in *Settlers*. Mines must be dug to employ miners and increase production**

## Hero worship



**Heroes are essential to *Heritage Of Kings'* attempt to be different. They can be used to perform missions to bring in a smatter of extra cash, as well as being used to trigger story events as they charge about the map. Talking to allied villages or negotiating with traders can only happen if a hero is present, so letting them die is not an option. Generally, the fighting pauses until you can produce a mob of men big enough to protect your hero and defeat the nearby bandit outposts.**



# DEAD OR ALIVE ULTIMATE

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 18
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: TECMO

## Rig out



**Until an Elton John management sim arrives, there'll be few gaming wardrobes to top *DOA Ultimate*'s. The 137 costumes here eclipse the previous record of 91 set by the Japanese *DOA2: Hardcore*. While successive completions of the Story mode will unlock them individually, enduring the lengthy Collection mode will secure you the job lot in one fell swoop. The ladies, of course, receive preferential treatment. The gents' attire, meanwhile, more commonly verges on the mind-boggling.**

*Dead Or Alive* remains proof-perfect that the tricks of marketing can be dirty without necessarily being cheap. The glamour of Team Ninja's trash opus is effective because its calibre, for something so brazen, is atypically high. With a title – a declaration, even – like *DOA Ultimate*, the series' latest reveals an audacity that, far from being diminished, is greater than ever. Having obliged itself to become a 'definitive' version, *Ultimate* isn't so much a sequel as an attempt to crystallise the series in the form of a two-part anthology. The first is a faithful version of the arcade original, the second is where the real pounds have been piled on.

*DOA* acolytes will already be accustomed to having their experience drip-fed to them over multiple instalments. Despite regional enhancements, even the Japanese version of *DOA3* was certifiably anorexic, much like the pre-*Hardcore DOA2*. Here, we're back at the wave's crest. The *Ultimate* version of *Dead or Alive 2* features a cavalcade of extras that arrive one after the other with continued play. The settings screen alone is enough to warm the heart with its unlockable system voices and the nefarious age selector. Every surface of the second game has been buffed to an eye-watering shine; it continues the series' rich tradition of dedicated comfort-gaming – a sensory indulgence that asks tirelessly to be devoured. The weather, interactive scenery and now traditional sub-sections of the many arenas have been universally augmented. Beneath the gloss, a deceptively simple engine of reverse and counter still provides a solid backbone while remaining almost entirely unaltered. Its developer's stubbornness is such that, even with this upside-down take on what's important in a sequel, the integrity of both the company and its IP holds firm.

Unfortunately firm would be among the least appropriate terms to describe either featured game online. Between matches that succumb easily to lag, the lobby can take ages to reach; during this review one particular black-screen pause lasted in excess of 20 minutes, the 'quit session' dialog stubbornly unavailable outside of matches. Supporting all game modes, the Live integration remains functional, though it's not to Microsoft's usually regarded standard.

Across the generations, though – from arcade premise to Xbox-exclusive – the game's title still rings true. Despite online issues and an incomplete roster, there are few reasons not to regard it as a zenith to Itakagi's master plan of culminating the series on a single platform. This is no true sequel, nor is there the intent or transformative change to suggest that it could've been. The result, however, is no less appreciated – lavish, generous and a step to the left of the standard follow-up. **[7]**



Declaring yourself 99 years old fails to unleash the pendulous, face-slapping 'Easter eggs' you'd expect





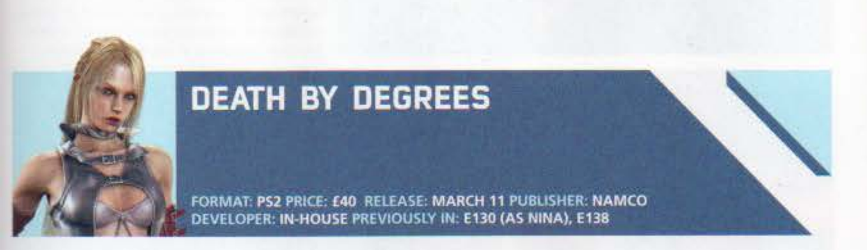

The character select screen reveals a few missing parties. The removal of Christie since *DOA3* will likely fill the Team Ninja mailbox



More a retrospective than bona fide sequel, *Ultimate* still offers particle effects and geometry way in excess of those that both the series and the fighting genre itself is used to

Little has been added to dramatically change the series' dedicated foundation of counters and reversals. Despite the comparative simplicity, the system remains solid





# DEATH BY DEGREES

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 11 PUBLISHER: NAMCO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E130 (AS NINA), E138

*Death By Degrees* assumes you care enough about Nina Williams to go on a mission to gradually unravel her repressed childhood memories through the medium of fighting terrorists. Part cod psychoanalysis, part action adventure, Namco's latest is unsuccessful partly because you won't give a damn. She may be one of *Tekken*'s most recognisable characters, but this solo vehicle does little to endear her. It also exposes Namco's relative inexperience with the thirdperson action adventure.

If it could be summed up in one word it would be undemanding. In fact, *Death By Degrees* throws in any number of game styles but none of them proves particularly taxing, bar the occasionally atrocious boss fight. Thirdperson combat, exploration, simple puzzle solving, a few minigames and swimming sections – it's an impressive list but no aspect is rewarding enough to sustain interest for long. Each combat is a chore, each save point a relief.

The game's sluggishness is all-pervasive, from Williams' lethargic climbing to the pauses between moving from third- to firstperson when you duck underwater. It even seeps into the menus, with seconds passing between switching in and out of the action just to look at the map or eat an energy meal. *Death By Degrees* progresses at such a sedate pace it's almost relaxing.

Working undercover for the CIA, Williams must investigate a shady organisation called Camieta by taking part in a fighting tournament aboard a cruise liner. It's supremely daft, of course, but the gradual unlocking of the ship is handled well due to the introduction of a clever portable fingerprint scanner. Prints taken from bodies and other objects, such as wine glasses, grant you access to the ship's restricted areas and are an imaginative way to avoid the usual key/door puzzles.

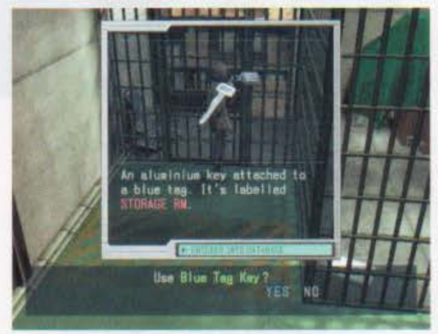
The combat does offer something fresh, with a special Focus ability allowing you to strike enemy vitals and deliver crippling blows (see 'Focus fudge'). Williams' combat moves are delivered *Grabbed By The Ghoulies*-style, with the right stick throwing kicks and punches toward the nearest enemy. It's not as shallow or as random as it sounds, but poor opponent competence means you never have to try very hard to learn combos.

Apart from the general languorous feel, there's very little that's tragically bad about *Death By Degrees*. Its major damning quality is that it's so undemanding and average, making it an ABC of adventure gaming. **[5]**



As well as feet and fists, slashing weapons and guns can also be used in combat, although there's no lock-on and enemies moving in and out of view are difficult to target






Problem solving is limited to finding crank handles and secret documents. So much has been borrowed from *Resident Evil* that at times the game turns into a spot-the-reference title






The game's saving grace is a nifty scanner that allows you to take fingerprints from bodies and objects – these can then grant you access to restricted areas. The idea is not entirely original but it's incorporated well




The boss battles are agonisingly weak, and you'll be fighting the camera as much as your enemy. Meanwhile, an amusing touch sees Nina's stockings ladder after some enthusiastic exploration and energetic fights

## Focus fudge



**Build up enough force power and you can deliver a critical hit to an enemy, or multiple enemies later on in the game. This takes you into an x-ray mode where you must quickly move the cursor over a vital body part to administer greater damage. On henchmen a critical hit is enough to kill them, but on bosses these attacks merely take off more energy. It's a good idea – but it's disappointing to see that breaking arms, for instance, has no correlative effect, with characters carrying on as normal, only with a shorter energy bar.**



# SAMURAI WESTERN

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SPIKE DEVELOPER: ACQUIRE PREVIOUSLY IN: E144

## Ranch dressing



Gojiro can be customised with a wide range of accessories, from the practical to the absurd. While some grant minor bonuses or penalties, most have no effect other than to weigh him down – but that's a sacrifice worth making to stalk the streets with an oni mask, a coffin slung over his shoulders, and a pet monkey.

The meeting of Wild West and Wild East has long been a source of fascination for Japanese creators, explaining this *Way Of The Samurai* spin-off's jump from the twilight of the samurai to the high noon of the gunfighters. While the protagonist isn't quite a Samurai With No Name – it's Gojiro – his quest to bring his errant brother to justice by the sword is pure spaghetti western material, testing his noble solitude against a gaggle of uncouth pistol-packing gaijin.

Though you'll never personally pull a trigger throughout *Western*'s running time, 2D shooters exert as much of an influence on the game as six-shooters: your concern at any given moment is to make optimal use of the space between bullets and enemies. Also taking a cue from the new school of shooters, Gojiro's best offence is a last-minute defence – he can return incoming bullets to their senders with a sword cut, or make a speedy dodge to spirit himself into position for a retaliatory strike. Close the distance and he's a wildcat among the cowboys, cutting them down in droves with such brutal flourish that Peckinpah would approve of the slowdown.

Structured more by enemy placement than environment, with locations reused across the 16 core stages, the meat of the gameplay is in learning each wave well enough to dispatch it efficiently. Expecting replay, *Western* encourages it with the option of the 'Ore Rules' – score-multiplying wagers available after finishing a stage for the first time, such as imposing a time limit or disallowing Gojiro's special attack. While damage taken during a stage is clipped from your final score, fulfilling several Ore Rules all but guarantees a high enough total to unlock a fistful of accessories and swords.

Accessories are largely for show (see 'Ranch dressing'), but swords allow Gojiro to strike various fighting stances with different combat movesets. Slow but devastating overhead postures, low-slung defensive stances and flashy two-sword techniques all have their benefits and drawbacks – although since focusing your leveling on one particular sword will hugely boost its positive modifiers, switching styles is more a matter of personal taste than necessity.

The *Way Of The Samurai* has always been one of dutiful compulsion rather than necessity, though, and *Western*'s ideal players will level every sword, unlock every alternate stage layout, and play through again on the hardest difficulty setting to track down every hidden character. Such devotion is rewarded by the speed at which individual levels can be cut to ribbons – with one misjudged exception that drags wearyingly – keeping the action fast and fresh despite its surface simplicity. *Western* is an old-fashioned game about an old-fashioned time, and although it may not possess the swaggering production values or wit of *Red Dead Revolver*, it's a thoroughly guilty pleasure. **[6]**



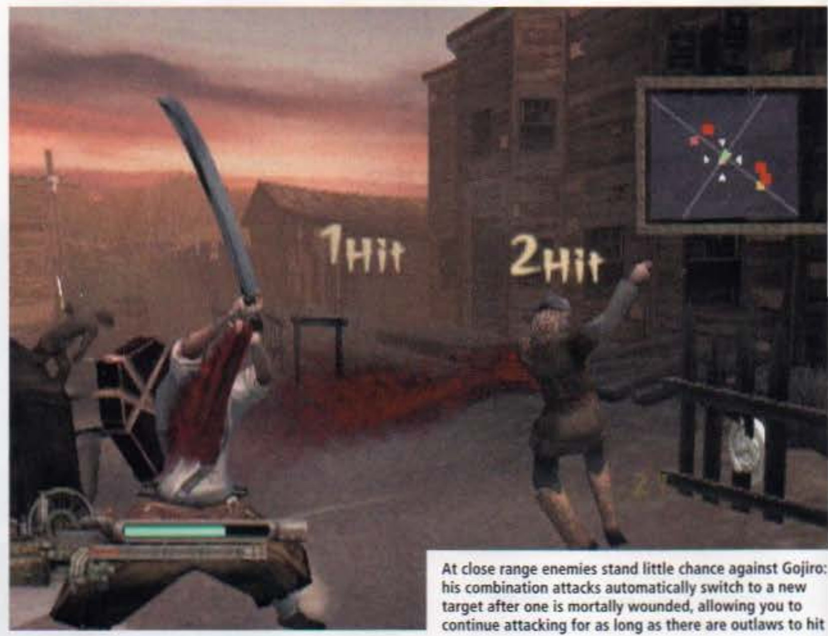


Scene-setting cut-scenes are superbly directed, although the character models don't hold up well in close-up





Returning single shots is easy enough, but enemies with shotguns (left) or machine guns are best dealt with by dodging your way into sword range. However, a well-timed (or lucky) reflection of an entire barrel's worth of shot can clear a rooftop of shooters in a pinch




At close range enemies stand little chance against Gojiro: his combination attacks automatically switch to a new target after one is mortally wounded, allowing you to continue attacking for as long as there are outlaws to hit






Like Sega's PS2 *Shinobi* – well, in truth, like almost every Japanese swordfighting action game this generation – enemies are essentially waypoints for combo chains, placed to usher you at speed through the level




Your plasma sword can lasso most enemies and drag them into striking distance: launch an attack with the right timing after a successful capture and they're immediately sliced in half

# NANO BREAKER

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£35) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (KCET) PREVIOUSLY IN: E133, E138

*Nano Breaker* was developed as a snack between PS2 *Castlevanias*, a further experiment with 3D action for series producer Koji Igarashi: as such, it inherits *Lament Of Innocence*'s engine and matches that game's satisfyingly effective combat, but not the atmosphere or appeal. The result is so clinical that it seems the game's own rogue nanomachines have stitched together a consensus body from past Konami titles to carry it – there's more than a hint of *Contra* in the consecutive sudden death set-pieces and boss fights, and the bleary environments never rise above a low-rent take on *Silent Hill*'s anti-aesthetic.

It also lacks the drive of its various donor titles, somehow managing to feel aimless despite the linearity of your trek through a mundane futurescape. Progression has no appreciable rhythm, just the 3D action-adventure formula laid empty: a brawl in a bare corridor, a half-hearted jumping puzzle complicated by camera and perspective, a boss, another boss, an overdue save point. As a side effect, the combat mechanics are left to carry the game alone, and it's a credit to this aspect of *Nano Breaker*'s design that they almost succeed.

Your plasma sword easily outshines its wielder as the star of the show, whipcracking with such precision that the absence of lock-on functionality seems not just intentional but self-satisfied. The four standard strikes flow effortlessly through combos and strobe into alternate attack forms, shaming even the most inventive attacks of your biomechanical foes. Few of those foes possess any real strength other than numbers, but those numbers ably fill the expanses between each save point, oppression that can be turned to your advantage through the game's ghoulish advancement system.

Bonuses to health and special attack power are awarded not for enemy kills, but from the amount of oil spilled in the process of killing them. Every blow that connects draws a gout of the stuff, but there's a flood to be tapped by lopping off your opponents' appendages before bisecting them with a finishing move – instilling the same work ethic of efficient sadism as *Shadow Of Rome*, and allowing a careful harvester to walk away from a fight stronger than they entered it.

In these moments of searing, warping afterimage and geysers of splatter, *Nano Breaker* is everything that an action game should be, but when the air – if not the ground and walls – has cleared, there are just as many moments when it's a catalogue of the genre's flaws. The most dedicated of slash 'em up fans may be willing to ride out the disparity between *Nano Breaker*'s furious highs and comatose lows, but this just doesn't feel like an experiment made for the player's benefit – unless it's one borne out by the next *Castlevania*. **[5]**





You're awarded a double-jump in time for some workaday platforming, and later it's upgraded with a boost dash (right), but both go largely underused, given that the level designers seem to have phoned in their work





Good performance in combat deactivates your cyborg's Limiter, indicated dramatically by the unfurling of a pair of metal wings (above right). While in this state, any finishing move can slice enemies in half regardless of their health, furthering the game's bisection fetish and showering the screen with fluids

## Cash in your chips




Your initially limited combo tree can be nurtured in any of the four disciplines – horizontal and vertical slashes, thrust and juggle – by installing Combo Chips in its junction points. Those with a fear of commitment will be pleased to find chips can be removed and reassigned elsewhere at any time to support your preferred fighting style.



## YOSHITSUNE EIYUDEN

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥4,800 (£25) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: FROM SOFTWARE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E141







*Yoshitsune's* horses make for beautiful steeds, but feel clumsy. When your support soldiers are horse-mounted, they can easily crowd the screen and cause the wrong kind of chaos to ensue

As well as joining games like *Genji* and *Yoshistune Ki* in celebration of the eponymous Japanese hero, *Yoshitsune Eiyuden* could also be construed as From Software's attempt to muscle in on Koei's lucrative *Dynasty Warriors* turf.

In that regard, however, it feels like an initially promising but ultimately bungled offensive. To begin with, *Yoshitsune Eiyuden* brings with it the kind of technical and aesthetic achievement that Koei's own series has been lacking in its subsequent iterations. Characters sport beautifully ornate armour, rivers run with the blood of enemies, and environments shimmer with the kind of striking glow that helped give *Otogi 2* such a memorably haunting look. But whereas both *Otogi 2* and the *Dynasty Warriors* series have enough gratifying, guttural destruction and chaos to arguably transcend their repetitive natures, *Yoshitsune Eiyuden* does not.

The combat – based on a functional set of square/triangle combos – feels primitive and hollow, with certain attacks rarely seeming to be able to connect properly with opponents. Yoshitsune is flanked by up to two generals, each themselves escorted by a number of troops, and who can be commanded to unleash a number of supportive special attacks which helps give battles a feeling of busyness. Confrontations feel slow-paced when compared to the hyperactive crowd control of *Dynasty Warriors* but, thanks to *Yoshitsune Eiyuden's* glorious looks, they do feel grander for it. Which makes it even more of a shame that the swordplay just doesn't cut it. In fact, replaying the game through with a speedier alternate character is more enjoyable than getting to be the titular hero – the very warrior whose ticker-tape parade this is supposed to be – which is a fine demonstration of just how short of current battlefield standards *Yoshitsune Eiyuden* falls. **[5]**





*Yoshitsune* is gory when compared to *Dynasty Warriors'* clinical, cardboard carnage. Defeated enemies spurt outrageous gouts of blood, while those near death can be skewered mercilessly



## LEGEND OF KAY

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: JOWOOD DEVELOPER: NEON STUDIOS

Despite the soft, friendly, machine-washable visuals, *Legend Of Kay's* plot is a surprisingly adult affair – an unashamed, no-holds-barred attack on American imperialism. This surprise is matched by its surprisingly aggressive use of language, with our feline hero accusing the enemy of being "lying bastards" within the first half hour. It's an immediately refreshing and invigorating start.

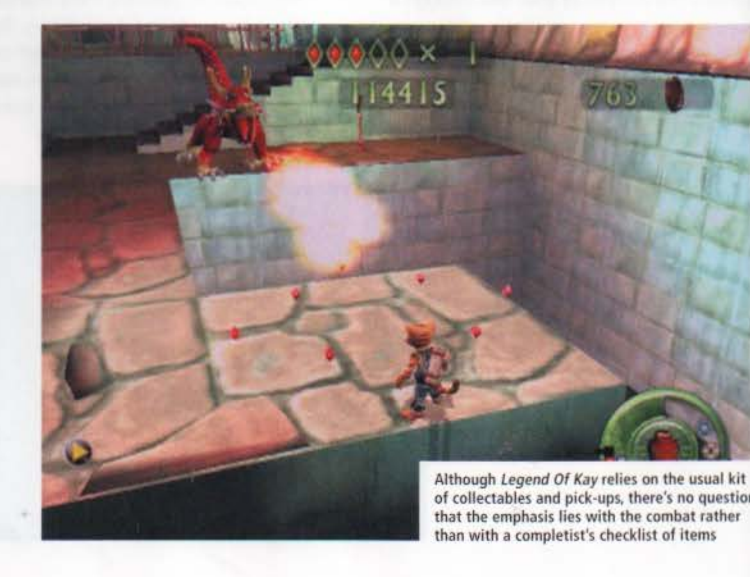
And while the surprises end there, the enjoyment the game offers continues. The platform dynamics are simple and the controls relaxed, helped along by a usually well-behaved camera. The fighting system is similarly simple and friendly, although the combo technique, allowing Kay to jump from enemy to enemy in a blaze of fur and blades, offers some innovation. Allowing the player to target off-screen enemies by means of directional arrows solves any obstinate camera trouble, though its imprecision can make striking into the unknown a risk. The save system is similarly geared toward smoothing the play experience, with save points refilling the health bar and memory card access happening behind the scenes so as not to upset the flow. The most serious snag is the inclusion of animal riding sections: with weak controls and tight time limits, a mistake means that entire, compulsory sections must be restarted more often than sanity permits.



The game's simple combat dynamics blossom when combos come into the mix, ramping up your offensive potential with every blow

There's a quasi cel-shaded look to Kay's world, with the animal characters well-designed and as beautifully drawn as those of any Rare title. Kay's voice will be familiar to *Halo 2* Live stalwarts: an arrogant and whiney American teenager. It's a fair match – fitting for a confident young cat – as is much of the voice acting, but eventually, and inevitably, it begins to grate.

At a time when games are so often over-reaching themselves, *Kay* represents a straightforwardly modest agenda. Its foremost pleasures are the evenly paced exploration, the pleasant graphical style and the unexpectedly humorous characters. By setting its sights at achievable goals, it gives itself a chance to reach them with an intelligence and verve which belie the game's simple stylings. While far from essential, this is a much more enjoyable adventure than, on paper, it has any right to be. **[6]**




Although *Legend Of Kay* relies on the usual kit of collectables and pick-ups, there's no question that the emphasis lies with the combat rather than with a completist's checklist of items





## IT'S MR PANTS

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: RARE










Admittedly, they won't be to all tastes, but *It's Mr Pants'* messy, childish stylings are as thorough and polished as you'd expect from Rare. And you'd be humourless indeed not to smile at the witty backdrops: after all, how many videogames are there that take visual digs at Salvador Dali?

Years in development, this strange little puzzler was originally known as *Donkey Kong's Coconut Crackers*; now Rare has used it to answer Nintendo's enthusiastic reclamation of its tub-thumping mascot with some spirited brand building of its own. The goonish doodle that is Mr Pants has long been an in-joke enjoyed by the faithful, and though his playschool humour will irritate many, there's no doubting that he's very Rare, and as British as marmalade sandwiches and Crackerjack.

Don't let *It's Mr Pants' Tetris* tics – those four-square shapes scored as deep in puzzle game tradition as in your subconscious – lull you into a false sense of familiarity. This design is unusual to the point of being counterintuitive. Tiles vanish when arranged into single-colour blocks of 2x3 or greater, but can be placed over tiles of other colours, so it's as much about layering, erasing and dividing as filling empty space. It bends the mind effectively but uncomfortably, and you'll still be fighting the ingrained instinct to slot and tidy after hours of play.

There are three modes of play: Puzzle, Wipeout and Marathon respectively pit your wits against Rare's designers, the clock, and your own ambition. Wipeout is a simple race to clear a random scatter of tiles in two minutes, while Marathon is a risk-reward score attack in which you build and clear your own blocks (the larger the better) while threatened by an encroaching spiral of scribble. They're tense, but neither induces the state of instinctive mental freefall needed to make freeform arcade puzzling come to life.

Puzzle mode asks you to clear a pattern with a set of tiles in fixed order, and it's a more substantial and rewarding challenge. But it's also more flawed. You can't see all the tiles you're provided with on the first run, which blinds the mind's eye and favours trial, error and memory in its place (unless you successfully second-guess the selection). Cleverest when at its most minimal, *It's Mr Pants* is a little too convoluted and coy a brain-tease, destined to live in the shadow of purer designs. **[5]**




With its strangulated exclamations and farmyard effects, the audio seems so perfectly calculated to annoy that it comes as a shock to realise its excellence. The music's queasy, lunatic pastiches are superbly arranged, and infuriatingly catchy



## SUIKODEN 4

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £45
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEB 18 (UK) PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E145

Soon after *Suikoden IV*'s title screen dissolves, your naval collegiate avatar is given the run of a port in celebration of his graduation. Overhead, stars, while neither twinkling nor shooting, seem at least well-arranged in static glory. But take a moment to switch to the firstperson perspective and gaze a little further upwards, past the last-gen jaggies of the rooftops, and you'll see nothing. A black, unpainted void stretching overhead just out of sight of normal play – presumably where the skyscape artists' imagination, inclination or budget ran out. Pernickety? Perhaps – but this neglect of detail seemingly permeates everything in the game.

*Suikoden IV*'s list of design shortfalls is near comprehensive. On land, interminable loading screens hamper progress up even the emptiest of streets, while wrestling with a contemptuous camera on the seas just to point your ship towards its destination is frustration inpixellate. The fighting mechanic has regressed further than even the Famicom's most formative JRPG output, although you can relieve the monotony by setting battles to 'auto', or paying your way out of any non-boss encounter. However, in contrast to this dumb down, the incidence of battles has spiralled up. Both on foot and in boat (there are three battle types including basic grid-based ship encounters), random encounters hammer progression until – far too late in proceedings – the ability to warp the ship delivers you from their tyranny.

And yet the *Suikoden* DNA remains. The series' USP, the collectable 107 'stars of destiny' (characters which form your army), is still appealing enough to encourage extensive sidequesting, especially in the latter half of the game – although you can take only four characters into battle at a time rather than the six of previous instalments. As characterisation outside of the fighting arena is largely non-existent, this further limits what little novelty the game attempts to offer.

Visually, this is shockingly bland and will have even the staunchest 3D advocate longing for the expressive 2D detail of the first two iterations. Perhaps that is where the real tragedy lies: that such a promising series has become crippled so quickly. This is refinement to the point of absolute regression, supplying neither the wit nor imagination that was commonplace in the narratives and scenarios of 16bit RPGs a decade ago. The result is a soulless videogame that stands as a grave indictment of how stale a series can become if it loses its spark of creativity and imagination. **[4]**



Unlike previous games, the central hub in which you house your collectable characters is not a castle but a galleon. Seeking out each of the 107 characters to populate it is pleasingly compulsive





Like the Xbox's *Pirates Of The Caribbean* it's possible to import and export tradable items from one island to the next for profit. Cash buys the runes for magic attacks, so healthy economic management is important


Dreamcast

# TIME EXTEND

## SKIES OF ARCADIA

FORMAT: **DC**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SEGA/OVERWORKS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2000**



**It's the Dreamcast's defining RPG moment, a pirate's Neverland where boats cruise the skies, and clouds hide far more than just treasure...**

It sounds like a tourist resort more than anything else: 'Come to Arcadia' says the brochure, 'a relaxing videogame destination that's a holiday of soothing escapism for the retired and burnt out'. But whereas most brochures offer sun, sea and sand, Arcadia's resort proffers six moons, an 'ocean' of fresh air and expansive rock drifts. Instead of redcoats, Arcadia has Blue Rogues. You won't be so much sipping margaritas by the pool as swigging spicy grog on the deck of a battleship. Despite the floaty, laid-back promise of its title, *Skies Of Arcadia* is a swashbuckling adventure worthy of its own Disneyland ride: "Where there's treasure... there are pirates" the game introduces itself.

Piracy in *Arcadia* comes in two flavours: black and blue. Black Pirates are those who plunder and pillage for their own greedy gain. Blue Rogues, however, are the kind of pirates who are fighting for a right to back up their wares – a band of merry men who steal from the rich in order to keep themselves jolly with homebrew alcohol while helping those in need. The game introduces the Blue Rogues in the midst of a raid on a booty-rich Valuan airship, as energetic teenagers Vyse and Aika throw themselves into the midst of combat before their captain – Vyse's father Dyne – even makes it aboard.

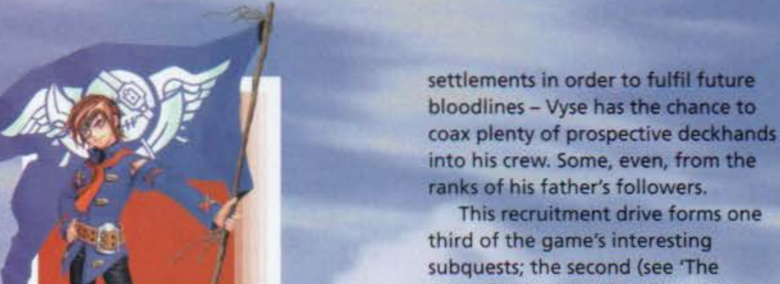
**The moment when Vyse officially leaves home, for example, with his skyfaring dad acknowledging him as an equal, is as touching as it isn't melodramatic**

From the off, Vyse is a refreshingly far cry from the typically moody, self-involved adolescents that often make up the boy-men of fantasy RPGs. Mature, ambitious and earnestly hungry for adventure, he helps give the story some genuine heroic credibility, of voluntary involvement through choice instead of being driven by fate and a disastrous past: empowerment, not obligation. He has both a mother and a father who are present to support him – that RPG rarity of a fully functioning family unit – and there's no great calamity that haunts him and forces him into seeking adventure.

The moment when Vyse officially leaves home, for example, with his skyfaring dad acknowledging him as an equal, is as touching as it isn't melodramatic, with both parents on hand to offer their blessings instead of blubbery histrionics. Vyse's down-to-earth nature is buffered by the aforementioned Aika, an ever-present confidante and childhood friend, and a playful female companion. More games need a marriage like this: splitting the emotional and verbal duties of the lead character into a double act, a sexless husband and wife who can reassure and question one another without the game having to resort to the internal monologue of a glum teen. Aika and Vyse's relationship is flirty and loving, but never blooms into the dreaded romantic subplot, filled with ellipses and uncomfortable mutterings. Virtual girls and boys can do more than just stumble their ways clumsily and bashfully through formative relationships, it seems.

**The familial feel** is reinforced heavily during the latter half of the game, with Vyse nurturing his own crew, establishing a base on a charming deserted island, cultivating the very culture that raised him and continuing his generation. Much in the vein of *Dark Chronicle* – where players recruit known villagers and allies, and relocate them to certain

*Skies Of Arcadia*'s random battles are notoriously abundant, and begin to feel obstructive when exploring. That they managed to dull such a glorious game is probably one of the best arguments for RPGs sidestepping such a laborious and draining method of drawing players into fights



### THE ETERNAL QUESTING

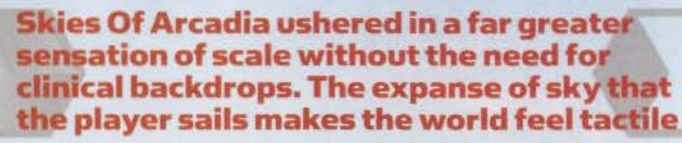
Released in the US in January 2003, *Eternal Arcadia* (or *Skies Of Arcadia Legends* as it's known in the UK) seemed to be Sega's attempt to give the renowned RPG the success it deserved, by offering up *Skies Of Arcadia* to an audience of hungry GameCube fans. As conversions go, however, it offered a plentiful expansion pack of extras but no significant changes to the core experience, apart from lowering the frequency of random battles. Bounty hunting missions were now available, numerous new discoveries and a Moonfish sidequest were tucked away in the game world, along with more detail on characters' histories. Finding a PAL copy nowadays is a surprisingly tricky task, however.

settlements in order to fulfil future bloodlines – Vyse has the chance to coax plenty of prospective deckhands into his crew. Some, even, from the ranks of his father's followers.

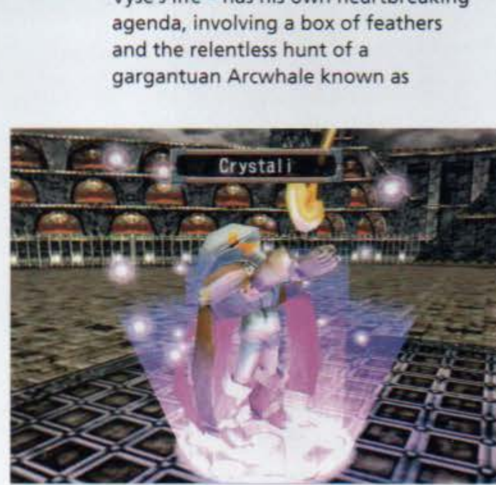
This recruitment drive forms one third of the game's interesting subquests; the second (see 'The discovery channels' for the third) is a far less obvious exercise in character building and garnering respect. At numerous times during Vyse's travels he'll have to answer pressing questions regarding what to do next, and how to do it. Ultimately, his answer won't change the flow of events, but making the 'right' choice for a Blue Rogue causes the game to make a small chime, indicating that Vyse's renown has risen. From Vyse The Competent to Vyse The Respected and – ultimately – on to Vyse The Legend, it's a clever little detail that forces the player to think about the situation, although some of the 'correct' answers can seem a little illogical. If the player runs away from too many random battles, Vyse will eventually earn the monicker of Coward, a crushing label considering that the inhabitants of Pirate Isle – the epicentre of pirate life – chat to you in accordance with your reputation.

The majority of *Arcadia*'s main players are anything but one-dimensional, too, with the exception of drippy weakling Fina. Captain Drachma, for example – an ageing, overweight grump with a hefty metallic arm who cuts in and out of Vyse's life – has his own heartbreaking agenda, involving a box of feathers and the relentless hunt of a gargantuan Arcwhale known as Rahknam. It's handled with *Arcadia*'s signature even-handedness, making revelations all the more touching.

But nowhere is this strength of characterisation more prominent than in the admirals of Valua's Imperial Armada. A five-strong force of Valua's best and most well-armed generals, they form Vyse's main adversaries in the race to retrieve the sacred Moon Crystals. But few of them are as out-and-out evil and dishonourable as their role suggests. Second admiral Gregorio, for example, is a blood relative of one of the game's heroes, and faces some tough introspection when agendas are fully revealed, leading him to become a martyr for justice. Fourth admiral Belleza, a sensual redhead who forms a swift crush on Vyse, has a tortured family background that spurs her on to back Valua's brutal masterplan, if only for the good it could bring. Third admiral Vigoro, a macho lunkhead with an embarrassingly phallic battleship, forms a disturbing fascination with Aika, but in defeat he still manages to retain some semblance of honour. It's these ambiguities among *Arcadia*'s biggest bad guys that raise them above dreary pantomime villainy, replacing it with something far more worthwhile.


**Skies Of Arcadia ushered in a far greater sensation of scale without the need for clinical backdrops. The expanse of sky that the player sails makes the world feel tactile**

**While *Final Fantasy* VII** introduced RPG players to rich and intricate prerendered worlds, *Skies Of Arcadia* brought with it less detail, but ushered in a far greater sensation of scale without the need for clinical backdrops. Without exception, it's ripe with colour, and the expanse of sky that the player sails makes the world feel tactile and navigable: they're in it, not on it. *Arcadia*'s world is composed of six distinct regions, whose climate is sculpted by its nearest Moon Crystal. Being elemental, these give rise to what seems to be a generic range of locations: the Red Crystal, for example, has formed the parched desert islands of Nasr, and the Green Crystal causes the lush forests of Ixa'taka to flourish. But their implementation is anything but clichéd, as the game fans them out before you with a peacock's majesty. The fact that everything is suspended in an ocean of sky, drifting between a sandwich of thick cloud, lends the game its own striking visual theme before you've even witnessed the gushing waterfalls of Yafutoma or the







Willowy redhead Aika's hair never loses its trademark pigtails, unless the player is curious enough to uncover an Easter egg early in the game. When she leaves the group to 'freshen up', players can get an eyeful of her letting her hair down via a peephole in the side of her house




Each character owns a number of Super Moves, unlocked by finding extremely valuable Moonberries. A patchy assortment of truly effective knockout blows and lame powers (such as Vyse's Counterstrike), they are almost always impressive but the sequences can drag on. It's a little-known fact they are skippable with the Start button






industry-choked glumness of electricity-powered Valua. And you'll be seeing plenty of Valua.

Witnessing the grubby, run-down desperation of Valua's Lower City is a distressing sight. Every so often the upper echelons of Valua host a public execution in its coliseum for all to see: "It's comforting to see someone worse off than yourself" offers one of the downtrodden inhabitants. It's a city torn by a massive class divide, where white bread is a luxury food fit only for the rich, but the inhabitants of both the Upper and Lower Cities live under the same gloomy, lightning-pummelled skies. Being an advanced industrial state with a runaway military budget, Valua plans to capture forces of nature known as Gigas, weapons of mass destruction that brought down the previous civilisation through the corruption of their power. The ruling heads of Valua are not theatrically evil heels, but are trying to solve its problems like any overbearing, paranoid first-world government that's grown suspicious of the rest of the world: pursue the ultimate in self-defence by ruling with a spiked iron fist. This tale of bloated science versus ecology is not a new one, but it's handled in a manner that's neither overblown nor insulting, and the plotline swoops and twists with believable and edible pace.

The game never lets up with this striking sense of location, either. The urge to see what grand delight waits just around the corner is a hefty one, although the definition of 'corner' changes quite ingeniously, as the final stretch of *Skies Of Arcadia* sees you gaining access to the ultimate in uncharted waters. The world as you know it has its boundaries peeled away, as Vyse breaks through the thick cloud cover at the ceiling and floor of the known world. It feels like being given access to the game's most intimate and prehistoric corners, rejuvenating it with fresh possibilities and discoveries. It makes the game feel as much like a genuine travelogue as a story and stat-powered excuse to save the world. That's an essential and often undervalued part of an RPG – of feeling well-travelled as much as well-experienced – and it makes the player feel that they're doing more than just nurturing a hero via the power of statistics.

## PINTA-SIZED HERO

***Skies Of Arcadia*** **made some of the strongest use of the Dreamcast's VM unit, although it had little competition during the machine's active lifespan. Upon meeting the diminutive Pinta at Pirate Isle, he can be 'sent' to your VM unit to complete a number of minigames in returns for items and other spoils. Pinta's ship will brave dangerous (and blocky) rock storms and simple aerial battles in order to retrieve booty for Vyse. There's depth beyond the simplistic tasks, though – Pinta and his ship can be levelled up nearly 100 times, making his forays a sub-RPG within a subquest.**






Thanks to a sterling localisation job, or maybe through having excellent source material to begin with, *Skies Of Arcadia* has a solid and understated quality of scripting: no childishness, no clumsiness, no multiple exclamation marks at the end of every other sentence, just sensible dialogue and vivid descriptions







## THE HAPPY CUPIL

Despite Fina's softly-softly approach to both battle and conversation, she wields a suitably cute morphing weapon by the name of Cupil. This familiar can be evolved by feeding it Chams, which are found via an imaginative use of the VM unit – whenever the player nears one, the unit screams out a series of high-pitched cheeps that get faster as you near the Cham. A Chom can also be fed to Cupil, to make it vomit up all consumed Chams, and with good reason – Cupil evolves into a variety of weapon forms depending on how it's fed.



One of the most prominent gameplay traits of *Skies Of Arcadia* – especially in comparison to more recent RPGs, and their potentially alienating arms race for esoteric complexity and depth – is its simplicity. It's stunningly straightforward without feeling at all limp for it, with perhaps only the game's magic system presenting some confusion. Casting spells uses up both magic and spirit points, and deciding just which enemy would be weak against certain elements sometimes feels garbled. But the remainder of the battle system feels more GCSE than PhD – Super Moves provide a flashy and potent alternative to standard attacks, and any character can choose to specialise in any category of spellcasting. Even the ship-based battle system, using an initially befuddling grid system, would become like the back of the player's hand in minimal time. And – essentially – it's possible to savour *Skies Of Arcadia* without the nagging sensation of needing a guide or a FAQ in your lap in order to see everything on offer.

**Where *Skies Of* *Arcadia*** is overbearing, however, is in the quantity of random battles and the length of some of its major skirmishes. Players have to scrap it out every few seconds during dungeons, it seems, leading to certain sections feeling too much like a uphill trudge than a freewheeling ride. The combat, however, is often easy, and the arduous length of the more important fights gives the sensation of becoming battle-hardened without having to meet defeat over and over.

Despite this accessibility, however, *Skies Of Arcadia* is beset early on in the game by a string of harsh baptisms that manage to sting virtually every player at some point along its length. It's common for RPGs to feature numerous and ludicrous difficulty spikes, but these are often excused because they become the player's rite of passage, earning them some virtual stripes and making battle knowledge second nature. *Arcadia* is no different. Taking place after five hours or so of play, this gauntlet begins with a trek through Valua's sewers to fight the Bleglock, a giant jelly with a soup of skulls swimming about in its stretched-to-transparent belly. Immediately after this is another punishing boss scrap – facing off against the Executioner and his deadly dash attack – and a further series of sub-boss scuffles with no chance to restock supplies of health and magic. Then the player will be handed newbie Fina, who enters the fray with level-one experience, thus making it a tricky task to strengthen her without a hike back to the training grounds of Shrine Island.

Done that? Next up is a lengthy and intense air battle with your first Gigas, one that you're unwittingly not meant to win, but one where you can easily expend all of your supplies – a mistake, since there's another major naval battle laying in wait just around the corner, waiting to club the unwary player. Still playing? Then you'll have to brave the strong winds of the South Ocean, a journey that sees your ship slowing to a plod, with random battles occurring at a seemingly incessant pace and starring enemies that can kill with a single magical attack. Survive this, though, and the game flattens out to become literal plain sailing, allowing players to scoot along and absorb the game's magical locations and adversaries without stumbling at any subsequent hurdle.

Certain portions of *Skies Of Arcadia* have not held up since its Dreamcast launch – character animation when exploring dungeons and towns feels almost pensionable – but many aspects remain timeless. The dazzling soundtrack still deserves to ride high in Sega's greatest hits, tugging and thumping the heart with its excellent sense of atmosphere; the cool chillout lullaby of the Deserted Island, the oppressive melancholy of Valua's Lower City, or the rush and energy of the all-important battle themes. And everyone who sees it through to its conclusion will be left with a cache of precious memories – *that* bit with Daccat's treasure, and the moralistic punchline behind it all; the twisted gravity of the Moon Palace; the sight of a fully powered Prophecy attack.

**Skies Of Arcadia remains an RPG apogee, not because of how much it accomplished, but because of how well it did what it did: few others can offer such an all-inclusive package**

*Skies Of Arcadia* remains an RPG apogee, not because of how much it accomplished, but because of how well it did what it did: few others can offer such an all-inclusive package of grand locations, charming stories, ease of enjoyment and characters colourful enough to match the crisp Dreamcast palette itself. Sure, plenty of other games can hit higher notes in each of these regards, but so few of them manage such a captivating synergy. "Where there's treasure... there are pirates" the game introduces itself. It's some modesty, though. As far as *Skies Of Arcadia* is concerned, it's the other way around.















## THE DISCOVERY CHANNELS

During ship-based exploration, the player will often stumble across curious segments of the landscape that send their onboard compass into a wild spin. These are Discoveries, uncharted curios that Vyse can unveil and, upon reporting them to the Sailor's Guild, take credit (and cash) for their detection. Hints regarding nearby Discoveries can be purchased, and your diligence is time-sensitive with regards to in-game events – fail to unearth them, and a rival explorer named Domingo will get there first. Ultimately, players can scupper Domingo in permanent fashion – giving themselves ample time to find Discoveries – by recruiting him into the ship's crew.




Unfortunately, the player never gets to see Pirate Isle (left) in this kind of detail, but it gives an excellent idea of the scale and style of Arcadia's island locations, as they're left bobbing and drifting in a sea of cloud





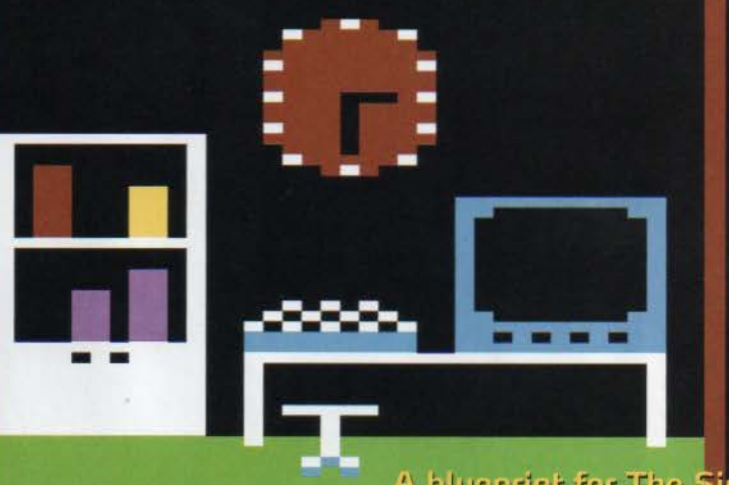
Go and collect your new Edge.



# THE MAKING OF... LITTLE COMPUTER PEOPLE

Twenty years ago, the sim-person notion seemed outrageous. However, that didn't stop Activision from bringing it to life...

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **C64** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE/RICH GOLD/JAMES WICKSTEAD DESIGN ASSOCIATES** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1985**



Once upon a time, in a less cynical age, we weren't afraid to call successful videogame designers geniuses. Indeed, it was a tag thrown at many of the young people wrestling with 8bit console and computer hardware in the early '80s (and doing very nicely out of it, thank you very much), often by excitеable journalists seeking to romanticise the Silicon Valley dream beyond its already dizzy visage. Some, however, were more deserving than others. One such person was **David Crane**, the man behind megahits like the *Pitfall* series and *Ghostbusters*, and pioneering life simulation *Little Computer People*, which first appeared on the C64 in 1985.

**A blueprint for The Sims, LCP presented you with an abode and an inhabitant, a hamster in a cage only with a lot more upstairs**

Essentially the blueprint for bestselling-PC-game-series-ever *The Sims*, *LCP* presented you with a spanky-looking abode and an inhabitant, like a hamster in a cage only with a lot more upstairs (in both senses of the expression). And that was it. He (and, despite the name *Little Computer People*, it was always a he, because of memory limitations) and his dinky dog simply existed there on your monitor, albeit in a manner brought to life by winsome



## LCP'S ORIGINS




**Some people (wrongly) believe *LCP* to be solely the work of David Crane. Here, he explains the real story behind the project:**

**"*LCP* bears somewhat less resemblance to most of my original titles simply because it began life as the product of another's imagination. The contribution of other creative people to the concept upon which *LCP* was based is common knowledge, but often overlooked. So as not to overlook anyone this time, I'll give you some of the history of the project.**

**"Rich Gold, described as an engineer, artist, designer, writer and cartoonist, had the idea to create what he called a 'Pet Person', along the lines of the 'Pet Rock' of the 1970s. This was to be a non-interactive, fishbowl view into the life of an artificial life form who went about his daily activities indifferent to the human viewer. Rich raised some development capital and hired an east coast developer, James Wickstead Design Associates, to realise this concept. The programmers and designers at Wickstead, many of whom have gone on to make other contributions in the videogame business, refined the concept and developed the look and feel of the Pet Person and the house he lived in. At this point, Rich tried to find a publisher for the Pet Person. He had no takers. The product was not deemed marketable, and no publisher would take it – it was rightly believed that no one would connect their Commodore to the TV, switch off their favorite TV programs, and sit in front of a non-interactive fish bowl. If it had surfaced ten years later when there was a PC on every desk, the Pet Person might have been the greatest screensaver ever created, but in the videogame market of the 1980s it would not achieve more than novelty-level sales.**

**"Activision, as one of the largest publishers of videogames in the business, was one of the companies that Rich approached. Activision's president, Jim Levy, thought there was enough interest in the concept to bring it to me for an opinion. What I saw was not a pet rock, but the beginnings of an interactive simulated life form. I offered to take the project to that next level. Activision bought the project, not as a finished game for publishing, but as a starting point on the first interactive sim-type product. Rich was given a large cash advance – to cover the staggering development debt owed to Wickstead – as well as a royalty on whatever Activision and I might eventually develop from his seed of an idea.**

**"Thus began one of the hardest programming challenges of my career. I kept the character and house graphics, as well as sound effects and music. But I had to interface with ten thousand lines of code written by other programmers [and] this is a programmer's nightmare, no matter how well written the code might be. I had many battles with Rich over interactivity. He maintained that adding interactivity was contrary to the Pet Rock concept, while I was firmly committed to trying to simulate an intelligent life form.**

**"The technical challenges were daunting as well. Activision personalised every single disk during manufacturing so that each LCP would be unique. I had to create and program unique personality and mood parameters to make each guy truly different. I needed a way to let them communicate with their owner through complete, grammatically correct sentences that would be different every time. And while billions of dollars were being spent on true artificial intelligence, I had to write a program on the lowly C64 that would parse and interpret English-language commands entered by the user on his keyboard..."**









animation, a smattering of amusing 'speech' effects, and, in 1985, the most sophisticated artificial intelligence yet seen in a piece of entertainment software.

"I think it's fair to say that the LCP had the most robust AI of any product developed for the early home computer systems," recalls Crane when we catch up with him at Skyworks Technologies (www.skyworkstech.com), where he still designs and codes games today. "Part of me wanted to make him the smartest thing in computing – maybe even to pass the Turing Test – but with the constraints of time in the software business that was impractical."

Clearly, watching a little man go about his business had some entertainment value in itself, but the key to longevity was allowing interaction between the user and his pet person. Along with being able to send your LCP gifts (such as books or records), and pat his head via a mechanical arm in order to raise his mood, a text box along the top of the screen invited you to input suggestions, such as 'Play on your computer', or 'Feed the dog'. And they were suggestions, not instructions, for it wasn't uncommon for you to enter what you thought were entirely reasonable proposals only for them to go flatly unheeded.

"As a compromise [to complexity] I gave the LCP the power to ignore you," Crane explains. "This became one of the most important aspects of your interaction with your guy. Since he could choose (based on his personality and mood) whether to respond to, or even acknowledge your keyboard input, you were unable to tell the extent of his understanding. This was a beautiful thing. Just when you started to think he had a limited understanding of the English language, he would react to your input with astonishing insight. You could never tell if he was stumped by your syntax or if he was just upset with you and willing to ignore you all day."

**Being ignored by** your LCP was frustrating. Here he was, living on your screen, using your electricity and swanning around like he owned the place. This wasn't the sort of 'game' at which you could cheat. There was no sure-fire method of getting your LCP to do what you wanted him to do simply because he was programmed to do his own thing.

"Rather than try to anticipate every possible response to an event, the code that controlled the LCP's actions made hundreds of decisions as it was executing," elaborates Crane. "And each and every decision was given randomness and a form of 'free choice'. I could have the program open in front of me and still not be certain what the LCP would do next. Each LCP had varying personality parameters for neatness, mood tendencies, choices in clothing, energy usage and appetite – to name a few. His mood, energy, hunger, thirst, responsibility, need for companionship, interest in music and many other parameters were continually updated. At any given moment, only he would know if he is too thirsty to feed the dog, for example, or too tired to eat. In fact, that was one of the more fun aspects of the LCP's brain development. It was so complex that I was as much in the dark as to what he would do next as anyone."

Getting to know your LCP, about the things that pressed his many buttons, became rewarding. His nods and smiles were only basic feedback mechanisms, yet they proved remarkably effective. But it went further than that. "The biggest challenge in the development of *LCP* was how to make him interact with people as an equal. That challenge pervaded every aspect of development," explains Crane. "There are a number of technical advancements I incorporated of which I'm proud. Here's just one: communication is a two-way street. So, besides making the LCP understand the user's typed messages, he had to communicate back to the user as well. I decided to do this through typewritten letters. I gave the LCP a couple of dozen 'interests', several 'needs' – food, water, companionship, etc – and a number of 'desires'. So when the LCP sits down at his typewriter he has a predetermined set of messages to convey – 'I'm hungry…', 'I'm lonely…', etc). To convert these thoughts to written letters, an Activision staff writer was given the task of creating at least ten variations of each particular thought. These variations were ordered based on emotional content – from angry to pleasant, or from starving to death to mildly concerned that the pantry is half empty.

## "Part of me wanted to make him the smartest thing in computing – maybe even pass the Turing Test – but it was impractical"








Then the letter is compiled from these 100+ phrases based on the emotional content of the thought and the personality of the LCP. The result was awesome. Without ever seeming to repeat himself, your LCP would convey his needs, desires, and thoughts to his owner."

Brilliantly, your LCP would also indulge you in various parlour games, including poker, adding another layer of interactivity. However, this element very nearly didn't make it in, as Crane explains: "The card game logic was almost lost due to lack of time. I had always wanted to play games with the guys, but giving them interactivity and a brain took all the time I had. Fortunately, [fellow Activision coder] Steve Cartwright was in between games near the end of the LCP development. I took time to put a game-playing interface into the game and gave Steve some parameters with which to work. He was able to code the card games in a few weeks and we were then able to interface his code into the final product."

**Building a game** with this much complexity under the bonnet took time – perhaps more time than any other title of its day. The project had already been in development for the best part of a year before Crane began work on it (see 'LCP's origins'), and he managed to bring it all together after another 12 months. It was a two-year project when most games took four or five months. And that added up to a lot of expense.




"Despite the critical success, *Little Computer People* was not a financial success," rues Crane. "The game sold pretty well for the time and business climate. But because of the huge cash advance paid to acquire the property, plus the exorbitant amount of time I had to spend to make it a marketable product, the game never recouped its costs. No company can stay in business publishing products that don't recoup their development costs, and Activision is no exception to that rule."

Those who did buy into *Little Computer People*'s innovative approach to play often found themselves consumed by it. We recall a story of a woman who bought two additional C64s so that each member of her family could have their own LCP. "That was a grandmother whose grandkids came over after school every day until their parents got home from work," chuckles Crane. "They enjoyed the LCP so much that grandma bought each of three kids their own disk, as well as three C64s for him to 'live in'."

Reports of *LCP* obsession weren't rare, and this resulted in some interesting after-sales service on the part of Activision, as Crane recalls: "The most common response from LCP owners was to think of them as people. Every LCP had a name – one of 256 names taken out of a 'name your baby' book – and they were always referred to by name. I would hear: 'You should have seen what Brian did last night'. So it was not surprising the heat we would take on the rare occasion that the game would crash. Unlike normal software defects that can be solved by sending out a new copy, people wanted "their Brian back!" (The C64 had a bug that would sometimes corrupt the disk when the LCP brain variables were being saved.) I had to develop a special machine for the consumer relations group that would do a brain transplant on a disk. You could send your broken disk in for the staff to repair. The machine read Brian's 'brain' parameters, including his look, personality, and preferences, and write them to a factory-new diskette. Many LCPs were restored in the Activision hospital for grateful users."






The excellent animation and limited but atmospheric audio was produced independently of Crane, who says of the LCP's 'voice': "I take no credit for any of the sound effects, but that one was pretty cool. It always reminded me of Charlie Brown's teacher scolding him from off screen in the classroom"

***LCP* made the** journey via conversion to other 8bit and 16bit computers, but there the story ended. Not that this was part of Activision's original plan.

"We had hundreds of follow-up ideas to *LCP*," Crane reveals. "I wanted to sell new houses that you could buy as add-ons. I wanted to have friends come over and visit. I envisioned an entire apartment complex of Little Computer People, all interacting using the same computer model. We thought of selling records, different foods, piano sheet music. The list was long indeed. It is a little sad, because we all believed that the concept could have spawned new products for years." Remember what we were saying about *Little Computer People* being the blueprint for *The Sims*? The concept was right but the audience wasn't yet ready, it seems.

But Crane doesn't seem the sort of videogame designer/coder/ pioneer to have regrets. Indeed, he looks back on *LCP* with some fondness: "I'm fairly proud of the level of interactivity squeezed into the time and memory constraints of the product. I got enough interaction into the final product to make each Little Computer Person seem intelligent, and, well... almost human. As for an abiding memory, I am still in the videogame business designing games 20 years later. I can only continue to do this for all these years as long as I believe that people are deriving some small amount of enjoyment from my work. *Little Computer People* has probably engendered the most emotional attachment of any game I have developed, and those emotions are all positive. So in spite of the fact that the product was not a financial success, I consider it to have been a worthwhile effort and a positive contribution to the evolution of the videogame."

# Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

**COMPANY NAME:** The Creative Assembly Ltd

**DATE FOUNDED:** 1987

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 75

**HEADS OF STUDIO:** Tim Ansell (managing director, below left), Mike Simpson (development director, below right), George Fidler (business development director in Australia studio)





**URL:** www.totalwar.com and www.creative-assembly.com

**SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
*Shogun: Total War* (PC), *Shogun: Total War Mongol Invasion* (PC), *Medieval: Total War* (PC), *Medieval: Total War Viking Invasion* (PC), *Rome: Total War* (PC)

**KEY AREAS OF EXPERTISE:**
Epic battles; deep, involving strategy





***Medieval: Total War* (above) and *Rome: Total War* (top) see the Total War engine operating with 2D sprites and 3D polygonal characters respectively**



**UK LOCATION:**
Southwater, West Sussex

**OZ LOCATION:**
Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, Australia

**CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Two unannounced PC titles and one unannounced console title, both with leading publishers

**TECHNOLOGY**

"The Creative Assembly is one of the industry's best-kept secrets, hidden in a nondescript corner of Sussex far from the bright lights and temptations of the flesh. Founded in 1987, the company initially specialised in sports titles until *Shogun: Total War* in 1990, a nifty, flavoursome design that did rather well. Since then the Total War engine has evolved into the beating heart of the company product line. This engine is now in a 3D incarnation and powers *Rome: Total War*, and will be used again for other games. It really does have the 'epic' feel that others only talk about. The system is also fairly content neutral, allowing us to create games that are big in terms of content and value. The engine provides the epic scale of a title, and we have to make sure the subject matter is worthy.

"Apart from using the TW engine for games, we've also leveraged our skills into TV production in the UK and US. Time Commanders, recently shown on BBC2, used Total War almost 'as is'. We provided all the software and much of the content (in terms of battlefields and military units) for the show. Half the fun, though, comes from watching the players suddenly realise that their cunning plans are ruined and crushed beneath enormous elephants – a bit like their troops! On the other hand, Decisive Battles for the History Channel used the TW engine to generate battles quickly and cheaply, giving viewers the right epic scale for events. No more pretending 'four actors really are an army'. The old skills that stood the company in good stead haven't been forgotten, though. There's a second CA team, even more secretive than the first, working away on something pretty spiffy.

"CA differs from most development houses in two ways: firstly, we own our IP. We don't have to secure licences and keep licence holders happy. We can concentrate on what we do best. And secondly, we have a proprietary company culture: a code of silence that makes the Mafia look positively gabby. We don't talk about what we're really doing. Ever."

# Right way to port

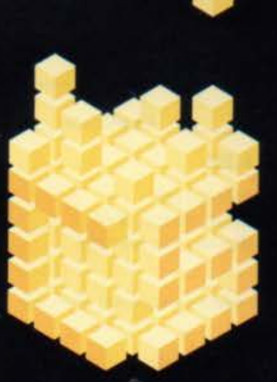
**Bedevilled by the increasing number of devices in the marketplace, Tira reckons its Jump technology could answer mobile developers' problems**



Paul Schaut, CEO, Tira Wireless

www.tirawireless.com



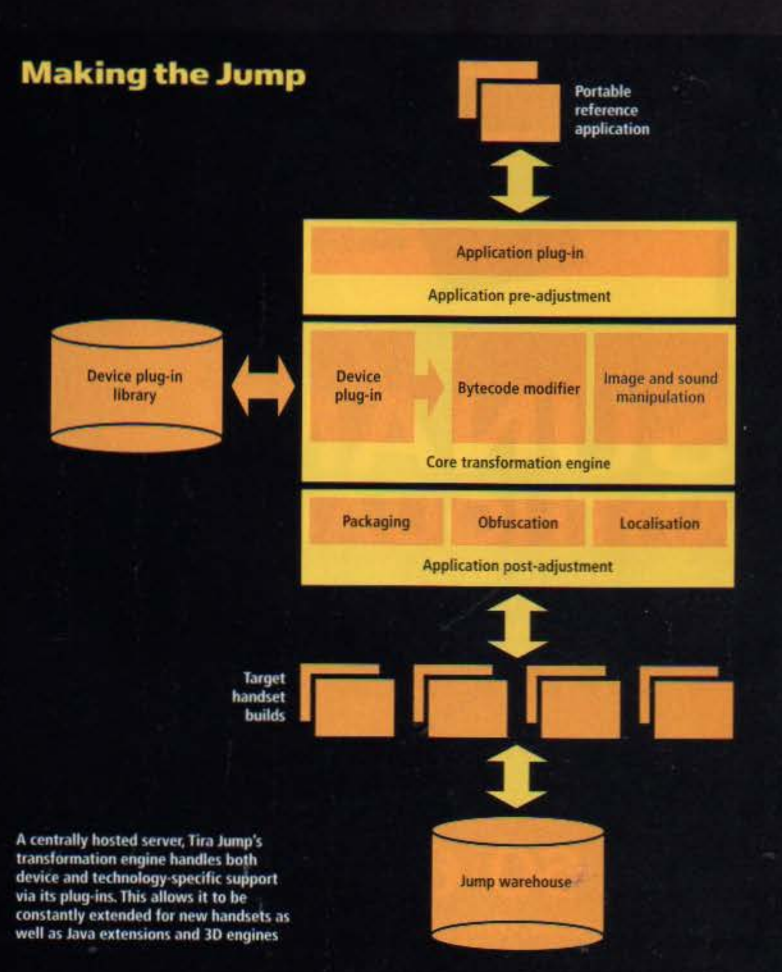


It says much about the headaches faced by the developers of mobile phone games that Sun Microsystems, kingmaker of the Java software standard, worries about fragmentation. "In a world of numerous unique handsets and mobile operator requirements, Tira Jump is a powerful tool that leverages Java's 'write once, run everywhere' promise to enable the fast and efficient deployment of mobile Java applications wherever they are needed," says **Juan Dewar**, Sun's senior director of its consumer and mobile systems group. The comment, perhaps unsurprisingly contained in a press release from Tira Wireless, provider of the automatic Java porting platform Tira Jump, is a perfect demonstration of the current Wild West mentality in the mobile space. With intense competition between the likes of Nokia, Motorola, Samsung, Sony Ericsson and others, both in terms of pricing and design style, few companies are adhering to standards. The result is hundreds of different phones, all with potentially different screens, amounts of RAM, key

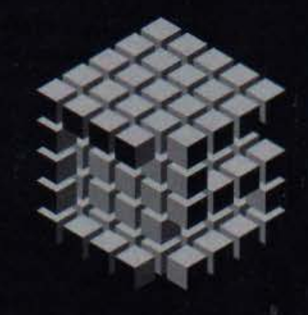



*Tomb Raider: The Osiris Codex* is a Java-based game that could have benefitted from the Jump process

## Making the Jump




A centrally hosted server, Tira Jump's transformation engine handles both device and technology-specific support via its plug-ins. This allows it to be constantly extended for new handsets as well as Java extensions and 3D engines



configurations and underlying software systems. And that's before you get into the extra entropy network operators and territory variations throw into the mix.

Of course, Java, and specifically the phone-oriented Java Platform Micro Edition (known as J2ME), was supposed to help handle such problems; hence Dewar's reference to Sun's now-infamous 'write once, run everywhere' promise. That even Sun offers a huge list of official Java extensions (called JSRs) which manufacturers may or may not apply to their handsets proves how deep the desire for fragmentation runs.

But bringing order to this chaos is Tira's goal. Originally set up as a developer and publisher of mobile games, it's since sold that part of its business to focus on becoming the de facto middleware platform for mobile content. "We sit in the middle between the developers and the operators. In a sense, we're the toll collector on the mobile application highway," grins CEO **Paul Schaut**, using one of the favourite analogies of business guru Warren Buffett.

The reason for his enthusiasm is the sheer rate of mobile phone proliferation. "A year ago, if a developer told an operator they had a game running on four devices, that was fine. Today, however, the operator will tell them, 'I've got 30 devices and your game has to run on all of them'," Schaut says. And those numbers just keep stacking up. Launching a game across Europe, for example, might involve porting it to 60 phones. Combining Europe and North America would see the target rise to well over 100. In total, Schaut reckons there's about 350 commercially viable phones. At least, that's the number Tira's automatic porting technology, Tira Jump, supports.

The key to the way Jump works starts with developers creating what Schaut calls a reference build of their game. "What we've done is set out guidelines for good portable applications or a



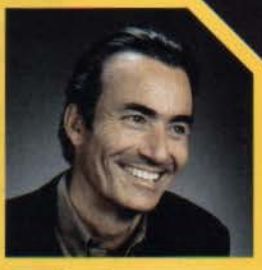

The most obvious demonstration of the problem mobile developers face concerns the different screen sizes they have to support. There are plenty of other differences too, including memory, chipsets, operating systems and software layers

design paradigm, if you will," he explains. This establishes good coding practice and ensures that the porting process can be carried out as efficiently as possible. "In the early days, we had folks saying: 'We're not writing to your API. Who are you to tell us how to write applications?'" Schaut laughs. "You always get that in a new technology market but eventually good coding practice shakes out and the cowboys get in line."

This reference build is certified by Tira and then passed to the Jump transformation engine. This is a central server, hosted at Tira, which is kept up to date with all new phones as well as sub-versions of existing phones. It generates multiple versions of the game, ensuring each works on one of the targeted devices, as well as dealing with different languages and some of the certification issues required by network operators. "We know more about devices than the phone manufacturers," reckons Schaut. "Each version of a phone's software, firmware and chipset can impact how a game works, so we have to be experts."

It takes Tira's R&D labs around three days to profile a new device. "It can get messy when a company launches seven new devices simultaneously, but it's our job to build those profiles and ensure that, as the first games are ported, we're checking where our plug-ins got it right and where they didn't, so the process becomes more efficient and the average porting time decreases," Schaut says.

It's this goal of reducing the time it takes to port a game that Schaut expects will be the driving force behind Tira's future growth. "I believe we can offer our customers a very solid return on investment," he says. "Compared to a manual process, on average, Jump reduces the time to port a single build from 40 to 15 hours." For a publisher dealing with 2,000 ports per year, Schaut says the cost savings of using Tira work out around $1.3m, as well as halving time to market. "Our job is to continue to add breadth and depth to Jump as new devices come out as well as continuing to improve our efficiencies," he predicts. "A 15-hour port is just the beginning."

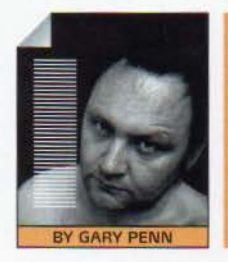


### Feeding frenzy

One mark of the maturing of the mobile game market has been the acceleration of acquisitions. Trip Hawkins' (above) new vehicle Digital Chocolate kickstarted the activity in the summer of 2004, picking up respected Swedish developer Sumea. Then prime UK studio Iomo was snapped up by US publisher Infospace for $15 million, while UK publisher Macrospace was gobbled up by Sorrent. Into 2005, it has continued with Infospace (again) picking up German game specialist Elkware for $26 million and French gaming channel In-Fusio also getting into the action via the purchase of US outfit Thumbworks.

According to Tira's Paul Schaut, one result is the imposition of new working methods: "When mergers and acquisitions occur, they are usually driven by a more dominant partner, whether that's in terms of personality or money, and the result is change. I think this means the industry's ripe for an alternative approach."

The other big change Schaut expects is a focus on quality, and he says it will become a key driver: "Just think about how poor quality impacts a brand. Some of these IP companies have spent billions over the years on their brands and they aren't going to let developers release substandard content. It's also an issue for operators and publishers too, because if a game doesn't work well on my phone, they are the people I complain to."



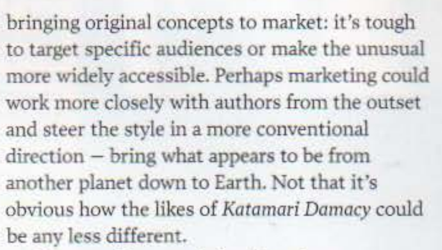

# MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

## Great original flavour

It's so easy to bemoan the lack of originality in all entertainment industries. That's why I used to do it so often. But the fact is, these days originality is alive and well. *Viewtiful Joe, Typing Of The Dead, Pikmin, Rez, Ico, Guru Guru Champ, Cubivore, Chu-Chu Rocket, Made in Wario,* the EyeToy... That's the start of a long enough list of recent enough products that are different enough in the way they look and play.

Not that originality guarantees quality or fun – just different: something easily revered or feared. The problem is it increasingly feels like the only way to experience the delights of The Different is to own imported or modified hardware or to live in Japan. *Katamari Damacy* is a recent casualty. Presumably the appropriate arm of Namco knows best and a potential European audience makes inadequate commercial sense.

This highlights the usual problem with bringing original concepts to market: it's tough to target specific audiences or make the unusual more widely accessible. Perhaps marketing could work more closely with authors from the outset and steer the style in a more conventional direction – bring what appears to be from another planet down to Earth. Not that it's obvious how the likes of *Katamari Damacy* could be any less different.



How much can and should authors compromise their visions in order to make their work more widely appreciated?

How much can and should authors compromise their visions in order to make their work more widely appreciated? It partly depends on the motivation: cash or cachet. Typically, those with creative conviction can't see anything anyone else's way and do what they do for (self) love not money. It's certainly unrealistic for authors to expect their dreams to be funded just because they believe in them and believe they are different.

No matter what the author's belief, commercial considerations are a reality. Ultimately it's a matter of authors generating enough interest from investors – aligning sensibilities with patrons and audiences (who effectively represent a fragmented investor).

A concept's journey from the author's head to the player's is a long one – like the difference between a single sperm and an eventual adult. Someone has to invest in making it exist, making it visible, making it available. Most of those involved in the process don't do what they do for nothing – and don't want to do it at all if there's little or no obvious chance of making good on the investment. Even if the concept is readily available to the world, perhaps through online distribution, bypassing conventional retail channels, the audience needs to be aware of its existence, which takes time and money – and then the audience has to be interested enough to make a commitment.

It's all very well having a concept that people want to use or play, but they have to be prepared to pay for it. *Zoo Keeper*'s a recent example of a competent treatment of a mundane concept. But while its approach is novel and stylish and I'm happy to play it for free in Shockwave form – and perhaps even go so far as to show my appreciation with a donation to the author – it seems out of place with other full-price releases.

So who wants originality? The bored. The desensitised in search of alternative stimulation. The innocent and inquisitive with a desire to expand their palettes. The greedy gourmet. The elitist in search of a new clique. A handful of journalists and developers and a few players besides. Minorities.

Me. I always want new toys to play with – or to play with the same toys in new ways, performing new activities in new playscapes with a new look (but not necessarily all at once). But I'm not millions of real people with money to spend on time to kill without the inclination to use that time learning something new.

Most players are indifferent to difference. They see or hear the name *Viewtiful Joe* and are immediately disinterested because it sounds stupid. They see pictures of *Vib Ribbon* in magazines or online and see stupid and unrealistic. They read the premise of *Chu-Chu Rocket* but it sounds stupid. They see video of *Cubivore* in play but can't see the point. They may even play *Rez* but not for long because it's senseless. They can't be bothered. We are all inherently lazy, and bollocks to it if it's not convenient to understand or experience.

So why bother with originality in a commercial context? On the face of it, there's less competition and an outside chance of becoming The Next Big Thing to inspire a generation of tributes.

But publishers typically have to put their shareholders first and authors grow older and develop dependencies outside MS Project: mortgages to pay and mouths to feed.

It's hard enough to make, manufacture, market and sell any concept – let alone a new one, to define, design, build and develop the unknown from scratch. It's easy to see why the familiar seems so much more attractive all round, in a space where small differences can make all the difference: fragments of originality, tiny spots of colour in world of grey.

Originality matters but it's not a matter of being wholly original – just original enough.

*Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki*





BY STEVEN POOLE

# TRIGGER HAPPY

## Snake in the grass

After a rather depressing interlude wandering round dank, gloomy caves, the sight of sunlight pouring through a hole in the roof is quite dazzling. Speleology, I decide, is not for me. Slowly I emerge into a greenish-yellow haze under a gorgeous forest canopy. I can almost feel the fluid pressure of the thigh-deep water against my legs as I wade wearily to dry land. I'm tired, and hurt. I salve and bandage my burns, and eat a tasty rat I knifed back in the caves. Now, what do I do about a bullet bee that is still burrowing into my abdomen?

Somebody once said the political is personal, and Hideo Kojima has found a graphic way to illustrate this idea. The Cold War plays itself out not just in a remote corner of the Soviet Union, but on the muscles and viscera of the hero himself. The body itself has become a battleground. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Metal Gear Solid 3* is the way it presents Snake as an ordinary human with a body that becomes fatigued and hungry, and gets injured in numerous different ways – partaking richly of 'the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to', as Hamlet put it.

I've always been particularly fond of Snake because of the way his totally uncool hairstyle somehow makes him seem more real, more human, than most digital action heroes. But now it's gone much further than that. The way each possible injury demands a different course of treatment – styptic and sutures for a cut (Snake's stoicism while doing this makes John Rambo in First Blood – which might well have provided the inspiration for this aspect of the game – look like a girl); ointment and bandages for a burn – raises the game's impressive physicality far beyond the run-of-the-mill RPG where you are playing with potions and numbers. Freshly killed wildlife, meanwhile, can range from disgusting to delicious, and, unlike generic videogame food, it can even betray you, if some serpent meat goes rotten and gives you food poisoning.

This is a novel sort of psychocorporeal immersion. Snake's body is more complex and interesting than the regular videogame avatar with a single health bar; it requires more nurturing, and so we come to feel more protective towards it, and mentally closer to its various travails. This is extended by the brilliant touch in which Snake regains stamina during the times you are not playing the game and the console is switched off – a wonderful example of Kojima's beloved counter-immersive postmodernism, but also a very logical way further to entwine the feelings of player and character – if you and Snake are tired at 3am, just turn off the PS2 and go to sleep; and when you return to the game next day both you and Snake will be refreshed and ready for action.

> "This is a novel sort of psychocorporeal immersion. Snake's body is more complex and interesting than the regular videogame avatar"

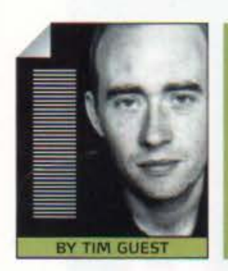
Of course, *Metal Gear Solid 3's* injury system also works to further Kojima's project of extending the notion of hurt in videogames. Games can show us explosions and fiery death, but rarely have they been interested in showing us suffering. The disconcerting realism of the inky blood that pooled around a shot guard's head in *Metal Gear Solid 2* was part of this process of stressing the consequences of violence in Kojima's games; and so now is the fact that a bullet wound to Snake doesn't just trim a discrete length off the health bar, but goes on causing him pain until he does something about it, even if it means digging around in his own flesh with a knife to extract the projectile. By appealing to our sense of self-preservation and even fear, Kojima makes a shootout all the less appealing, especially at harder difficulty levels, and so cleverly nudges us further towards playing the game as a true sneak 'em up.

With all this management of wounds and food, not to mention the camouflage system and the occasionally tiresome backpack management for the soldier's tools, *Metal Gear Solid 3* is in one sense closer structurally to a driving simulation, in which you must replace a car's components and possibly see them fail during a race, than to most action games. And games that share its level of character management, such as *Deus Ex*, do so only on a far more abstract level. Here, you can really *see* Snake getting tired and woozy, and it matters more.

It's a strange path we have travelled. Once upon a time, we didn't have bodies in videogames at all. We controlled little clumps of pixels that were more or less representational, but in our actions we were pure mind. Then Donkey Kong made us human, and later *Prince Of Persia* and *Tomb Raider* were milestones of animation, but the body was still homogeneous. Now the bleeding and digestion of *Metal Gear Solid 3* appear alongside the apparently opposite phenomenon of using our real bodies to control games, as with EyeToy or GameTrak. But they are similar developments: trying to situate us, embody us, ever more solidly in illusionistic worlds. Mens sana in corpore sano – in games as in life.

*Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames (Fourth Estate) Read more: www.stephenpoole.net*




BY TIM GUEST

# THE GUEST COLUMN

## Wilde at heart

I never would have guessed **Wilde Cunningham**'s peculiar condition. Not at first, anyway. In a world full of punks, dominatrices and nerd-chic hipsters, Cunningham's spiky red hair and orange skin seemed like just another fashion statement. In hindsight, though, the evidence was there. His ambitions, for example, were enthusiastically wide-ranging. He wanted to build a house. He wanted to build a castle. He wanted to build a waterfall. He wanted to run a store. He wanted to pilot a helicopter. He wanted to influence the world positively. He wanted to buy some guns. He wanted to publish his life story. He wanted to be a woman.

Well, we all have needs. So if it wasn't for Cunningham's friend **Lilone Sandgrain**, I never would have known the reason for all his conflicted plans. Wilde Cunningham has full-blown multiple personality disorder. It's no wonder he wants nine things at once: he's nine different people. But that isn't a problem. Wilde Cunningham is a resident of a virtual world called *Second Life*. We're through the electronic looking glass, where a real-world negative becomes a virtual positive. Here, his condition is something wonderful.

Outside of *Second Life*, the nine souls of Wilde Cunningham are nine separate people. They're day-residents at a Boston, Massachusetts project for the physically disabled. Alone, none of them can use a computer; together, and with Lilone Sandgrain's help, they have all the skills they need. Of the nine, only one can read. Only one has enough motor control to move a mouse. Only one can type. When they band together to inhabit their new *Second Life*, though, none of these restrictions matter. In *Second Life*, they are free from their wheelchairs, free from the prejudice of others, free from shame. They are free to be themselves.

After we met, Lilone Sandgrain introduced me to the nine. "There's John," she said. "He's key. He makes decisions. Charlene's still learning how *Second Life* works – she's shy, but really witty when you get to know her. There's Micah. She's the joker. There's Mary, we call her the Queen of Hearts. Nichole – she's shy. She won't talk unless she knows you. Scott – he really influences everyone else. Danny's deep. He's cried over *Second Life*."

"Good to meet all of you!" I say. I'm expecting a chorus but, of course, his reply comes back as a line of text.

"We feel the same!" Cunningham says. It's January, but the virtual gift shop they run in *Second Life* is still playing holiday tunes. I wade through their home-made virtual snow, and ask how they decide what to say.

> In our virtual worlds, we are free from gravity and friction. Up can become down, a personality disorder can become an advantage

"Well, we all toss out ideas," Cunningham says. "Lilone helps. Everyone chips in when they agree."

In real life, Lilone Sandgrain is a helper at the Boston disabled home. Three years ago, hassled by her boss over a cigarette break, she finally quit her "managerial-type job" to help out at the home. She's never looked back. "No regrets," she says, "even when the rent's due." In March this year, she became a spare-time resident of *Second Life*. Her hobby came up in conversation at the home, and the residents all begged to try. The management was reluctant, but after months of "pulling and tugging, lots of red tape and circles," the centre agreed to allow access to *Second Life*. The group made a male character, because there were more men present that day. They called it Wilde after the unofficial name for their raucous clique inside the home. They argued over what skin colour to choose – "because there are both black and white in our real-life group," says Cunningham, "and we didn't want either of these because neither is better. So we chose orange."

The management of the centre decreed the group could access *Second Life* for only four hours each week. Still, Sandgrain says that in the three years she's worked with the Wilde crew, she's never seen anything enrich their lives as much as *Second Life*. The nine souls of Wilde Cunningham have known more their fair share of injustice. "Perhaps the greatest pain is when our dignity is taken, our humanity, feelings, kicked around and abused," they wrote together, on a postcard on their virtual gift stall. That suffering has wrought a patience and a sympathy that the able-bodied can never know. "They know shame their whole lives," she says. "All of them. They almost always feel shame. Or could, at the drop of a pin. But not in *Second Life*. Here, there is no shame." In our new virtual worlds, we are free from gravity and friction. Up can become down, a personality disorder can become a distinct advantage. And, according to Sandgrain, in *Second Life* the disabled are the ones with the super-abilities. "I can't stress this enough," she says. "If you are fortunate enough to get to know them, you are the one who will suddenly feel disabled, by all they will share with you."

*Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta*



BIFFOVISION
by Mr Biffo

# THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMING
Chapter 124
Gaming World Records

## FATTEST CYBERATHLETES

5. K (543lbs, Ohio, US)
4. Raptorize (578lbs, Stockholm, Sweden)
3. Zynapsis (612lbs, Leeds, United Kingdom)
2. Cyber-X (754lbs, Florida, USA)
1. Darth Crysis (893lbs, Seoul, South Korea)

## MOST COMMON CYBERATHLETE MEDICAL COMPLAINTS

10. Mario Tennis elbow
9. Eyestrain
8. Sleep deprivation
7. Epilepsy
6. Self-loathing
5. Rickets
4. Sociopathic delusions
3. Manic depression
2. Sprained wrists
1. Genital abrasions

## …UNPOPULAR FANBOY TYPES

…nt robots

## …ST EFFECTIVE FORUM ZINGS

…urai costume!

Girl talk

# IS YOUR BOYFRIEND A VIDEO GAME ADDICT…

Video games!!!! They're everywhere. Shops!!!!!! Homes. Bags!!!! They're literally everywhere. And, as any girl knows, when it comes to spending time with your boyf it's those pesky games which pose more of a threat to your relationship than insecurity and teenage pregnancy!!!!!!!!! ?!!!

If you're worried your boyf may be spending more time with Lara Croft than you, Not Quite 18 Magazine sets out to help by posing the question – Is Your Boyfriend A Video Game Addict?!?!?!?! Find out in this easy-to-answer questionnaire!!!!!!

**1. It's your birthday, and your boyfriend has promised you a night on the town. Does he:**
a) Take you for a romantic meal, followed by a moonlit walk through the park
b) Take you to the cinema, but plays Solitaire on his phone throughout
c) Tell you he's changed his mind about going out, and hands you your birthday present – a lurid Ms Pac-Man costume, with a built-in easy to open butt-flap and peephole bustier

**2. Your boyfriend meets your parents for the first time. Does he:**
a) Turn up in an immaculate suit, with a box of chocolates for your mum, and minds his manners the entire time
b) Belches the Sonic the Hedgehog theme music after drinking a cup of coffee
c) Turn up wearing nothing but a pair of swimming trunks, with the title of every Mario game scrawled over his body in marker pen

**3. You are both trapped in a lift. Does your boyfriend:**
a) Press the emergency button, and then calmly wait for help to arrive
b) Assure you that someone will be along to rescue you shortly – most likely someone who looks like that bloke out of Splinter Cell
c) Start trying to remove the control panel, because the problem is likely to be nothing more serious than a malfunction in a circuit board designed like a sliding block puzzle

**4. What do you feel is the weakest aspect of your relationship?**
a) You don't spend enough time listening to each other's problems
b) He doesn't spend enough time listening to your problems
c) He doesn't spend enough time listening to your problems, and he keeps asking you to wear a lurid Ms Pac-Man costume, with a built-in easy to open butt-flap and peephole bustier

**5. You talk to your boyfriend about your hopes for the future of… relationship. Does he:**
a) Hold your hand, and assures you… he wants the same as you
b) Insist that he will always have fe… for you, so long as you give each… space to pursue your own intere…
c) Laugh in your face, and say that… could never spend his life with s… who doesn't know the differenc… between Link and Zelda, and the… start jumping around the furnitu… shovelling handfuls of hallucinat… mushrooms into his moustachio… gob while shouting that he's becoming 'super'

**6. What is your boyfriend's be… attribute?**
a) His sense of humour
b) His manual dexterity
c) His SSX Tricky tattoo



How can I tell if a b…







Issue146

I would like to take issue with your response to my last letter that my problems with Ubisoft's games were a localised issue: on the contrary, I know many legitimate users who were unable to play their games due to their copy protection specifically preventing the game from running when disc-emulation software is present (even when running it with the authentic CD in the drive).

Even more disturbingly, I know of cases where users with more than two hard disc partitions were unable to run *Prince Of Persia* due to the protection assuming disc-emulation software was present (even when it was not) due to the large number of drive letters.

Other companies are not free of guilt: the illegible CD-key issued with *Neverwinter Nights* is a staple thread subject on Bioware's tech-support forums, and both me and a friend (who bought the game at the same time so that we could coop through it) had to obtain new ones from Atari.

In the midst of all this negativism, however, I would like to point out that my experiences with Steam have been on the whole very positive! With the exception of some unacceptably long loading times, I found it a very innovative and hassle-free content-delivery system, and I very much hope that Valve will iron out its problems and perhaps license it to other developers. I think that spending a few hours downloading the game in advance of playing it is a good trade-off for the freedom from physical media (which can be lost or damaged) and the hassle of inserting the CD in the drive every time you want to play (if I wanted to disc-swap I would have bought a console). I was able to play *Half-Life: Source* on my family's computer when I came visited for Christmas without the need to remember to pack game CDs.

In spite of my professed love of lavish packaging, I believe online content delivery is the way to go for games. If there really is so much illegal downloading of games going on, then developers really should get in on the act: it worked for id years ago, when the demo version of *Quake* ground the internet to a standstill! If suprnova.org was inundated with demo versions of games instead of cracked full versions, there would be far less people breaking the law. After all, only the most determined 'pirate' would choose to download a (potentially virus-infested) 4Gb download of a game he doesn't know he will like instead of a 1GB completely legal demo. (Although in my opinion the label 'pirate' should be reserved for people who actually sell illegal copies of games, the rest being 'illegal users'.) And if the demo is really that impressive, it might give potential downloaders some pangs of conscience if they choose to download a cracked full version rather than pay a fee for the rest of the content. Online delivery is cheaper (a saving which developers may choose to pass on to their customers, further decreasing piracy), and frees game makers from dependence on their publishers. While there's no substitute for finding a wrapped copy of a long-

## If there really is so much illegal downloading of games going on, then developers should get in on the act: it worked for id years ago with Quake




***Katamari's Damacy*'s failure to secure a European release is frustrating, says Nick Drake. Namco's title joins a long line of acclaimed games never to reach these shores, but there's hope for the sequel**



**"Silence, Earthling! My name is Darth Vader..." Back To The Future. Twenty years old, I think, now. RedEye references the movie in his column. Not sure why I'm telling you this. You must surely already know. I suppose after ten years of buying Empire magazine and not recognising a single spine quote... Anyway, December's editorial-page movie line was from Three Men And A Baby. A Guttenberg classic. Didn't spot the reference within the mag, though. Still, half a point ain't bad. Keep 'em coming and keep 'em easy.**
Kelsey Jackson

**You mean you didn't know December's quote was in recognition of the birth of the first ever Edge baby (above)? You're not paying attention.**



awaited game under the Christmas tree (especially if the current trend for cheap packaging goes away and the 'fresh smell of shrink-wrapped manual' **Edge** liked so much returns), it should eventually become the exception rather than the rule.
**M Papadopoulos**

We're still looking into the sort of problems you're talking about, and will have the definitive account soon.

As for counterfeit software, you suggest practicing pirates would gladly switch to demos if given the option. However, the pirates in question have already shown themselves very willing to put up with the risks of virus infections, the frustration of broken torrents and the expenses of newsgroup subscriptions to get what they want for less. And, as piracy becomes more and more widespread, stealing full games can – as your letter suggests – sometimes be a more streamlined process than buying the proper retail version. It may be, in time, that online distribution solves both problems by making games harder to pirate and easier to authenticate, but for now both problems are holding PC gaming back at a time when it should be flourishing.



M Papadopoulos praises Steam's performance in delivering the *Half-Life 2* experience

## Interesting to see Katamari Damacy get runner-up status for Innovation, Best Visual and Best Audio design; will we ever get to play it in Europe?

It's interesting to see **Edge** award *Katamari Damacy* runner-up status for the Innovation, Best Visual and Best Audio design categories [**Edge** Awards, **E**145]. Do you think there's a chance people in Europe will get to play it ever without having to jump through import hoops? There seems to be a huge demand on the net for a wider release (there's even a petition!). I contacted Namco some time ago and got the standard 'no plans to release in Europe' response.

This is especially disappointing for such a game – one that hardly requires significant (any?) localisation. **Edge** often has comments from developers on their struggle to get publishers bought into new game concepts: Namco has perhaps the brightest star of 2004 yet seems to be suffocating it. And in the US it's a budget title (though when I last checked Amazon they were out of stock).

I've seen rumours recently that Namco may be reconsidering... could **Edge** help put a little pressure on Namco to let us all see just how good this game is? Let's hope *Katamari Damacy 2* gets a wider audience!
**Nick Drake**

Apparently the possibility of a PAL conversion of *Katamari Damacy* was complicated by 'technical issues', and the possibility of its official appearance here should be ruled out. Be heartened, though, that the critical acclaim handed out to the first game (at a level Namco wasn't expecting) means that the sequel has every chance of getting an official release in Europe.

Am I alone in preferring Zzap!64-era Gary Penn to the version we see today? For starters he's a lot less scary as a cartoon than in the flesh. Judging by the photo that now heads his column, his natural state appears to be naked and angry, so if you could replace it with a cheery drawing of him with his thumbs up I might sleep better at night.

More seriously, I'm not sure that it is well advised to push so relentlessly for the adoption of 'toys' as one of the fundamental descriptors of gaming. In itself, the word 'games' doesn't really help in the establishment of the art as a serious one, but it does have certain virtues. The first of these is that everybody actually knows, at least roughly, what you're on about when you talk about videogames. The second is that it's not the word 'toys'... for the love of God, man, what are you thinking?

If we lived in a perfect world, the notion of innocent play would be one that all mankind would embrace. But the truth is we don't. As such, lumbering gaming with that kind of tag is really not going to help it on its path to broader acceptance. What gaming needs in order to develop is the establishment of an environment in which the truly adult is seen as acceptable and appropriate by publishers and creatives alike. While high-profile figures such as Gary Penn continue to bandy about such regressive terminology, this may never happen.
**Richard Brind**

We forwarded your letter to the naked and angry Gary, and this is what he had to say in response:

"Of course, just because I'm not embarrassed to admit that I enjoy playing games with toys doesn't mean everyone else has to be comfortable with the idea. (I imagine more people would be happier admitting they played sex games with sex toys instead.) I also don't see why toys and games in any form can't be considered 'art'.

"The fact remains that these playthings are toys and we use them to play – typically games. The key difference between, say, Barbie and Lara is the materials they are made from – one is plastic, the other digital – but they are both blatantly dolls.

"That said, we call people who play act for our benefit 'actors' or 'thespians' rather than 'pretenders', despite the fact that acting is no less a puerile pastime than playing with toys (virtual or real) – it just pays better and carries greater kudos. So I guess I agree that there is scope for revision to appease a pretence... but I'm still using 'toys' to play 'games' until more appropriate terminology comes my way."

**I'm 18 and at that stage where I'm getting offers from universities to study for my degree. I've applied to various places, but one in particular that caught my eye was Derby University. They are one of three universities in Britain that have taken on a new course – Computer Games Programming. Being an avid gamer (and coder), I applied for it, and I've recently been sent an offer to study there. After following some of the adverts for recruitment in your mag, it hit me that it would be another four years at least before I could get myself a job... but how will I know if the industry will still be as alive then as it is now?**

**What's going to happen to the gaming industry in the next few years? Any thoughts or projections on what we're going to expect, three or four years from now?**
**Scott Davies**

**Any skills you learn now will be relevant to the videogame development industry as it will exist in only three or four short years' time. In terms of change, though, artists' roles will be given more weight, and from a coder's perspective you can expect to see even more specialisation than there is today, with more roles being set up specifically to handle artificial intelligence and so on. Be aware, too, that 'realistic' physics components will soon become cornerstones of most high-profile action games, so demand for expertise in the area will be high. And don't forget handheld development: people will still be playing 2D games in the future, although it is a competitive area for talent.**

**As for whether or not the videogame industry will still be as vibrant as it is today, all signs point to it being even bigger, although some of the names making games right now may no longer be around.**

**Later this year we'll be producing a supplement dedicated to jobs in the videogame industry which will go into these issues in more detail.**

Continued

After reading Danny Keaton's response in **E144** to Ben Tipple's letter about parental ignorance of the content of titles, I felt moved to speak up. I'm a parent myself, and I have to say I'm disturbed by the gaming community's tendency to drone on about 'tabloid hysteria' rather than face up to what is a very real and very serious issue.

Let's be honest, Rockstar's *GTA VC* certainly has its merits, but Danny, quite apart from the thinly veiled drug references you choose to ignore, some of the missions and objectives *GTA* sets its players are not the sort of thing any sane parent would want their children to play. I don't blame Rockstar for exploiting their niche successfully, but I'm not going to applaud them either. What's needed is common sense and some effective regulation.

Meanwhile, the film-style system of ratings is logical but, I fear, next to useless without a calm and thorough campaign to inform parents. One obvious step would be to display titles for older audiences separately, perhaps requiring publishers to indicate the potentially controversial content on the packaging. This is a serious issue. As graphics become ever more realistic (ie, like movies) and environments increasingly interactive (ie, unlike the passive medium of movies), the moral issues around violence and 'mature' themes will become more pronounced and much, much harder to ignore.
**Pete Inglis**

**Stevie McClatchey's letter in E146 struck a chord with me. He states the oft-heard argument that games, like pop music, are obsessed with the next big thing. I'd like to use this idea to predict the future – I believe that we will see a levelling-out of technology with the next or possibly next-next generation of consoles and PC hardware. The race to have the most 3Ds or the best tripixel normal ordnance survey mapping will be over – everyone will have the same tech. This will lead to a return to 'old' values of gameplay and immersion – but some would argue these things never really went away.**
David Chapman

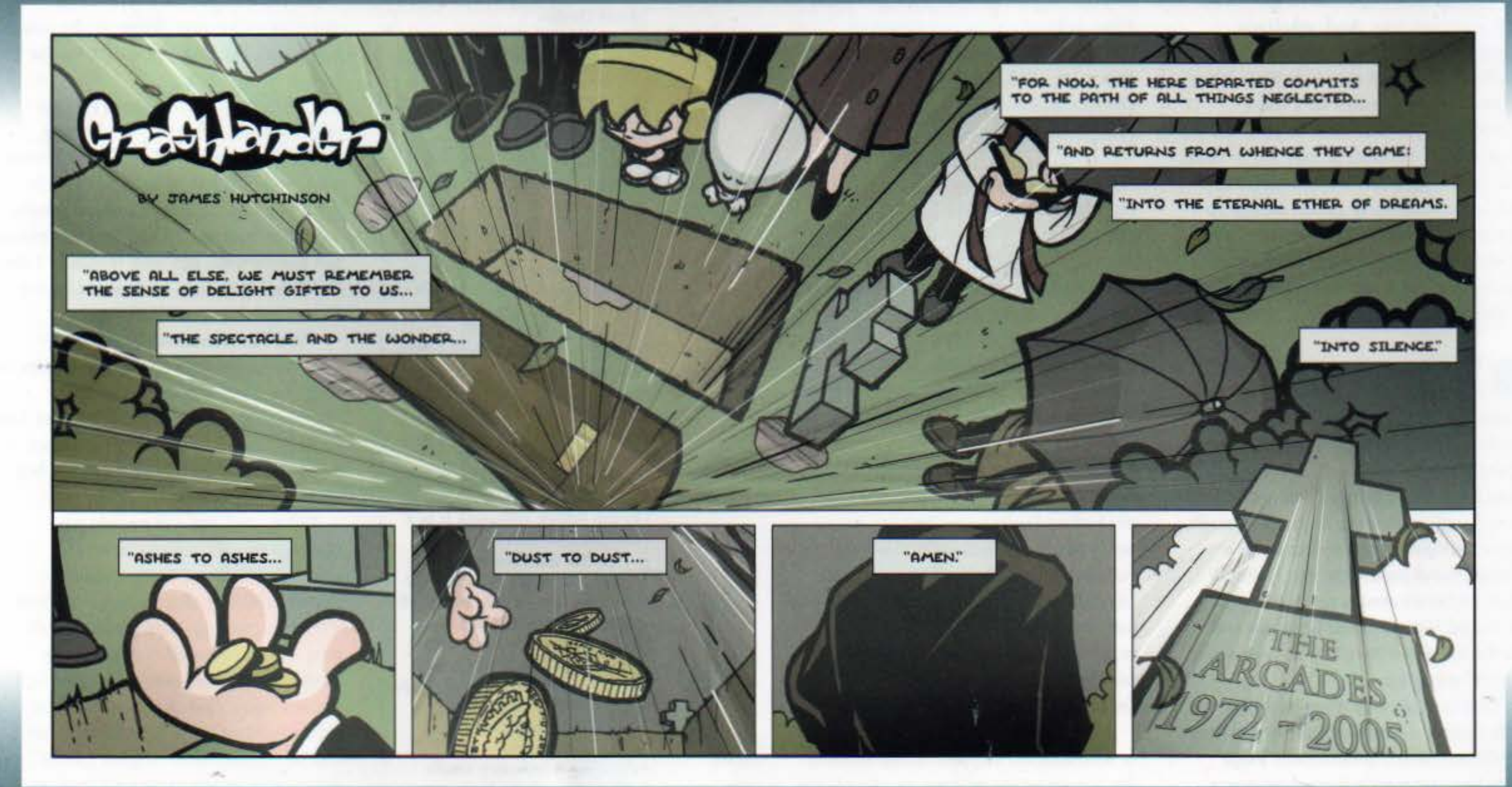
Looking down the spines of my **Edge** collection stacked up neatly in a row, and overlooking the jarring change the magazine's redesign had wrought on its black-and-white beauty, I couldn't help but notice the preponderance of sequels. *Resident Evil 4*, *OutRun 2* and then *Tekken 5*, *Metroid Prime 2*, *Halo 2* and *Ico 2* all in a row – what happened to the original games?

I realise there are strong business reasons for sequels – reused characters and scenarios drawing in gamers afraid of something new to the comfort of a familiar game – but surely **Edge** should be promoting the original games more than the sequels, and should be putting them on its covers and spines.
**Ritchie Cooper**

A genuinely interesting topic, this. So which games would you like to have seen on **Edge**'s covers over the last 12 months? Let us know via the usual address and we'll report back in due course with some kind of top ten.

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW

Inbox




Visit the Crashlander archive at www.crashlander.com/edge





# Next month

**Edge** 148
on sale March 17


MARCH 2005
£4.00
future
publishing
Media with passion
9 771350 159038
03
gamesradar.com